Henry James

The Portrait of a Lady

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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Oxford New York

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New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published as a World's Classics paperback 1981
Reissued as an Oxford World's Classics paperback 1998 and in 2008
This edition published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in–Publication Data

James, Henry, 1843–1916.
The Portrait of a Lady / Henry James;
with an introduction and notes by Roger Luckhurst.
p. cm. —(Oxford world's classics)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978–0–19–921794–6
1. Young women—Fiction. 2. Americans—Italy—Fiction. 3. Inheritance and
succession—Fiction. 4. Married people—Fiction. 5. Triangles (Interpersonal
relations)—Fiction. 6. Italy—Fiction. 7. Psychological fiction. I. Luckhurst, Roger.
II. Title.
PS2116.P6 2009
813'.4–dc22
2008048612

Typeset in Ehrhardt
by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Clays Ltd., St Ives plc.

ISBN 978–0–19–921794–6

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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With an Introduction and Notes by
ROGER LUCKHURST

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THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

HENRY JAMES was born in New York in 1843. He received a cosmopolitan education in New York, London, Paris, and Geneva. After an abortive attempt at training in art and then law, he became a journalist and author, living principally in Europe. He lived in London from 1876 to 1898, travelling extensively in France and Italy, where he set many of his novels. He first achieved fame with *Daisy Miller* (1878) and *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) was widely admired. He was at the centre of London's literary life for over twenty years before leaving the city for Lamb House in Rye, where he had a last great flowering, composing *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). His writing from this period is marked by an extraordinarily dense, subjective style that was widely admired but was increasingly unread by his contemporaries. In later years, he suffered from depression and a sense that his work was being overlooked. Nevertheless, he was awarded the Order of Merit in 1916, having adopted English citizenship to declare his support for the English army in the Great War. He died in 1916 and is now seen as one of the principal forerunners of the Modernist revolution in the novel form.

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THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

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INTRODUCTION

[*Readers who do not wish to learn details of the plot may prefer to treat the Introduction as an Epilogue*]

The Portrait of a Lady is one of the key novels in English literature. It has been lauded by novelists like Graham Greene and John Updike and has been a compulsory novel for discussion by critics as eminent as Raymond Williams, Harold Bloom, and Terry Eagleton. In *The Great Tradition*, F. R. Leavis judged it 'one of the great novels in the language'.[1] It is one of the pinnacles of the Realist representation of character, and Harold Bloom unashamedly confesses his love for Isabel Archer and defies readers not to fall under the same spell. If Isabel becomes an object of desire for some, she has also undoubtedly been one of the greatest sources of identification for readers: a young woman negotiating a treacherous adult world. To trip her up, the novel contains one of the greatest Gothic villains in literature, that desiccated husk of a man Gilbert Osmond. Its formal brilliance makes it the pivotal, unavoidable novel of the late Victorian period, offering us crucial insights into the transition from Victorian to Modernist novel forms.

All of this ought to suggest excitement, a sense of getting to grips with one of the masterpieces of literature, but it is also, let's confess, a little bit intimidating too. It is not so much a question of whether it will measure up to the weight of expectation, but whether *we* will measure up to *it*. In a novel that focuses so much on defining character through moral and aesthetic discrimination, will we be found wanting if we struggle with it? Some have. It can certainly take a while to adjust to James's difficult style, but if the reader has patience, the novel opens up a brilliant sense of capturing the complexity of being human. The aim of this Introduction is simply to offer some routes through the massive edifice of *Portrait* with a view to helping the reader appreciate just why it is such an important work and why it repays the time you have to invest in it.

Life and Career

Henry James (1843–1916) was born into a family made wealthy by his grandfather's business interests.[2] His father, Henry James Sr, set about spending most of his inheritance to support what became an extremely eccentric life of the mind. The children were experiments for their father's distinctly odd views on education, religion, sex, marriage, and life. These beliefs changed regularly and his dissatisfactions with different schools, systems, and philosophies meant that the young family was constantly on the move seeking the right environment, shifting from New York to Boston to Paris, London, Geneva, and beyond. The five children all suffered from this disruptive life. William, the eldest, experienced several severe breakdowns before settling into university life at Harvard to become one of the greatest psychologists and philosophers of the turn of the century. Henry suffered a host of mysterious physical complaints that shaded into psychosomatic illnesses throughout his childhood. His parents seemed to indulge these symptoms as signs of great sensitivity. Such damaged attachments left him, as far as anyone can know, a lifelong celibate, although often developing intense amatory friendships with both men and women. Henry's younger sister Alice would come to regard her own profession as a hysteric. She was often bedridden with nervous prostration, and spent the last years of her life trying, as she put it in her extraordinary diary, to get herself dead. The two youngest boys, Wilkie and Bob, seemed to exhaust their father's interest. Whilst the delicate William and Henry were protected from enlisting in the Civil War, Wilkie and Bob were forced into the army and sent South. Both were injured and traumatized by their war experience, and lived out desperate post-war lives, disregarded first by their father and then by their guilty elder siblings.

Henry, trained to be ignorant of the world of business, nevertheless had to find a profession as the family inheritance dwindled. He attempted several, trying out as an artist, then starting a university degree in law, before beginning to write journalism and reviews and then short stories in the 1860s. In 1869, he took his first journey to Europe alone and sent back ecstatic letters about his adoration of the ancient cultures of France and Italy, places that seemed steeped in rich history against the thin soil that barely supported American letters. This journey also suggested a means to escape the suffocations of family life and find a mode of independence. He published his first novel in 1870, became a successful reviewer, travel writer, and commentator in leading American journals, and in 1875 he travelled to Paris,

the beginning of his permanent residence in Europe. James remained fairly adamant that the best hope for the American writer was to leave America and give oneself over to saturation in European civilization. Yet just as he had struggled to get beyond the surface of Italian life in the early 1870s, so his year in Paris was fraught with difficulties.[3] He met his great literary hero the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev and through Gustave Flaubert's Sunday afternoon salon was introduced to the leading modern writers of the time, including Émile Zola and Alphonse Daudet. Yet his origins in Puritan New England left him appalled at the immorality of their bohemian private lives and he shuddered at their 'unclean' fictions. It was significant that James was reading George Eliot's last great novel *Daniel Deronda* at this time, for Eliot's discursive and intrusive moralizing narrator was completely out of fashion in Paris. In December 1876, James abandoned Paris to live in London. Within two years he was at the centre of the literary life of the capital. London would remain his main residence until 1898, when he moved to Rye in Sussex. He travelled extensively in Italy but very rarely returned to America. He was sufficiently exercised about his commitment to England that he finally adopted British citizenship in 1915, in part a gesture of complaint about America's tardiness in offering support to England at the beginning of the Great War.

One of James's abiding themes was the encounter of the Old and New World, in an era when political and economic power was inexorably shifting towards America yet Europe retained much of its cultural authority. In his first mature novels, *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and *The American* (1876), Italy and France are encountered by American men initially confident that they can possess all the finery Europe can offer, hoping to collect either art or a sophisticated wife. Both are confounded. In *Daisy Miller* (1878), James reversed the gender of the encounter and brought the defiance of the young American woman into the machinations of the Old World, with tragic consequences. This melodramatic combination gave James his first great success: he invented a type, The American Girl, that soon stepped off the page and into European society. The American Girl, he was to reflect later, 'had been grown in air in which a hundred of the "European" complications and dangers didn't exist, and in which she also had had to take upon herself a certain training for freedom'.[4] James was widely celebrated and *Daisy Miller* sold extremely well. In 1880, James took this slender tale and elaborated it massively for *The Portrait of a Lady*, although at its core it is just another story of the encounter of America and Europe. Well received, many reviewers nevertheless hesitated over its length, its relative inaction, and its sometimes curious narrative decisions. The book was a culmination, but also a turning point.

Both *The Bostonians* (1885) and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) were critical and commercial failures and James became the implicit target for attacks on the so-called 'analytic novel', a term often associated with the filthy French (later in the 1880s, Henry Vizetelly would be successfully prosecuted for publishing an 'obscene' work in translation in London by Émile Zola). In 'About Fiction' the new literary star of the revived romance form, H. Rider Haggard, advocated the virile and energetic romance form against the enervating feminine decadence of the analytic novel. Haggard was tired of women in novels who 'soliloquise and dissect', whilst the men were 'emasculated specimens of an overwrought age'. 'About their work', Haggard continued 'is an atmosphere like that of a boudoir of a luxurious woman.'[5] James was self-evidently the representative of this effete foreign mode. James progressively lost readership for his novels and in the 1890s he abandoned the extended form for experiments in shorter fiction and the theatre, where he hoped, only half-jokingly, to make a fortune.

After a few attempts to adapt his work for the stage in the early 1890s, James finally persuaded the Haymarket Theatre in London to premiere his play *Guy Domville* in 1895. The opening night had a restive audience, portions of which jeered and booed the author, to his immense distress. The public humiliation was completed by the run being abandoned and replaced by Oscar Wilde's new play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. To James, Wilde was a vulgarian, a brash sign of the times, and positively dangerous to cautious bachelor aesthetes like James. This danger was finally evidenced in Wilde's arrest and downfall for indecency only weeks later. James abandoned all hopes for the stage, but returned to fiction with a weirdly scenic twist in his style. He presented perverse scenarios that were brilliantly crystallized, yet full of elusive dialogue, radically restricted perspectives and ambiguous conclusions. These experiments definitively shifted James from the Realist mode he had inherited from George Eliot and towards something that we would now recognize as early Modernism, where the real is filtered through the impressions of often singularly perverse perspectives. Whilst admirers saw James as further extending the art of the novel, he lost much of his popular audience. Even friends and allies found this notorious 'late style' something of a trial. His elder brother William regularly railed against the obscurity of plot and the circumlocution of his brother's sentences. H. G. Wells, his new neighbour in Sussex, read *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) with a mixture of delight and bewilderment at its refusal to clarify the status of the ghosts in the tale. Indeed, Wells was sufficiently disturbed to contemplate jumping on his newfangled bicycle and riding over to demand an explanation from the author in person. Modern critics have often ridden

speedily in the opposite direction. F. R. Leavis suggests something goes horribly wrong in the later James, undermining his earlier achievements. Raymond Williams sees a symptomatic splitting in James's career, as the sociological becomes divorced from the psychological, the novels progressively twisting in on themselves.

The late style was to produce a last burst of novelistic creation, with *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl* (1902–4) revisiting the transatlantic theme with infinite nuances and shades of misprision. Then, from 1905, he spent several years on constructing the literary monument to his career, the twenty-four volumes of the New York Edition of his work. The motives were pecuniary as well as literary. Deluxe editions had made the estate of Robert Louis Stevenson and other authors many thousands of pounds in the previous decade. James laboured for this aim, but also to polish his life's work into the uniform gleam of the late style. He extensively revised his fictions (he made over five thousand 'corrections' to *Portrait*, for instance) and wrote a sequence of lengthy prefaces for each volume. Whilst the project was a commercial failure and another bitter disappointment for James, the aesthetic theories espoused in the prefaces came to represent, for many, the first mature theory of the modern novel. James did not live to see this—the prefaces were only first collected together as a separate book in 1934. He wrote two extraordinary autobiographies in an abstracted and densely metaphorical style, which revealed very little about himself, and died in 1916.

In a career of fifty years, James spanned major changes in economics, society and geopolitics. Understandably, his art changed too. He lived through the era that brought in the apparatus of modern professional authorship: agents, copyright payments, best-seller lists, the Society of Authors. Yet his progressive alienation from the market gives us one of the modern prototypes for the inverse valuation of art and money. The less commercial James became, the more he was anointed as 'The Master'. No matter that James was always interested in money; the model of the great artist, misunderstood by the crude market, had been secured.

It should have become clear from this sketch why *The Portrait of a Lady* should hold our attention. It is not just a compelling tale of a woman betrayed, although that will do well enough. It exists at the cusp of James's career between different styles, narrative possibilities, and audience expectations.

The Architecture of The Portrait of a Lady

The most striking images of Isabel Archer place her in highly symbolic spaces: she is seen first and last on the threshold of the doors leading into the grounds of Gardencourt. She moves from the vast open spaces under the dome of St Peter's to entrapment in the over-decorated rooms of Osmond's 'house of suffocation'. Ned Rosier sees the stately and melancholy Isabel framed there in a gilded doorway, the prize object of Gilbert's art collection. The metaphors of the book are insistently architectural. Isabel's imagination, the narrator warns, is too active: 'when the door was not open it jumped out of the window' (p. 45). Wishing to know her cousin Ralph beyond the superficial niceties, Isabel 'would have liked to go past through the ante-room . . . and enter the private apartments' (p. 72). Ralph in turn extends the metaphor, regarding Isabel as an 'edifice from the outside . . . But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof' (p. 75). Every house has a symbolic function: we need to fear for Isabel when she arrives in Florence and journeys to Osmond's villa, 'a blank-looking structure' that 'was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes' (p. 231). This house will lead to a marriage where '[h]er mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park' (p. 427).

James patiently establishes a dialectic of open and closed spaces, from the dark confines of Isabel's childhood home in Albany (complete with walled-off false front door) and the prison of Pansy's convent to the wide expanses of idyllic Gardencourt and the evocative wastes of the Campagna outside Rome that free Isabel temporarily from the remorseless good taste of her husband's palazzo.

James picked up the architectural metaphor in the central image of the Preface to *Portrait* that he wrote twenty-five years later:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will . . . [A]t each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a fieldglass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other (pp. 7–8).

This statement deserves considerable attention. It can be read as James's appeal to the aesthetic freedom of the novel that James had been insisting upon for decades. In his 1884 essay 'The Art of Fiction', James urbanely demurred from setting any moral or artistic restrictions on the novel, arguing 'that the good health of an art which undertakes so immediately to reproduce life must demand that it be perfectly free . . . A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value.'[6] It is just this sort of freedom that the innocent young Isabel espouses when she first arrives in Europe, and she comes to embody, especially through her plunge into suffering, the Jamesian blurring of ethical and aesthetic openness and freedom. But what aesthetic choice best reflects that philosophy?

The metaphor of the 'house of fiction' could be seen to uphold the virtues of the Realist novel. The Victorian art critic John Ruskin, a major influence on James, cajoled artists and viewers to observe the real truly, stripping away habits and conventions. 'The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to *see* something, and tell what it *saw* in a plain way,' he proclaimed.[7] Is the portrait of Isabel such an attempt? Yet a portrait must also be housed in a frame and a structure, and James understood that if Isabel was his central figure he must also pay attention to 'the neat and careful and proportioned pile of bricks that arches over it'. *Portrait*, the Preface continued, 'would build large—in fine embossed vaults and painted arches' (p. 12). Conceivably, then, the vast elaboration of the novel derives from the impulse to represent, if not a whole society then a significant class fraction of it. This aim was why the literary critic Georg Lukács valued the Realist novel above all other literary modes: 'The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given . . . The novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life.'[8] In a significant exchange with Madame Merle in Chapter XIX, Isabel upholds a belief in her absolute selfcontrol of her destiny, whilst Merle warns her that 'every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account . . . One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps' (p. 207). Isabel's education is in how she must come to grasp the hidden relations of money, ambition, and greed that determine what she had once thought were her own acts of freedom. She does not choose her house; the house chooses her. 'In *Portrait*,' as Elizabeth Machlan suggests, 'houses do not only set the scene; they suggest a course of action.'[9] This education is what Realism promises: seeing the concealed totality, the rooms of the mansion entire.

Victorian Realism was a complex set of shared conventions that evolved throughout the nineteenth century.[10] It valued the accruing of empirical details of everyday life over abstract systems, and tended to be historical, secular, and broadly democratic, extending representation to ever-wider circles of society, shadowing the political reforms of the century. If Henry James was hardly the man to read for reflections on the historic transformations in Europe (there is barely an indication in a novel set in the 1870s that both France and Italy have just undergone massive political upheavals), his fictions always centred on the intricate machinations of the cash-nexus and the marriage market. A key Jamesian concept is *relation*, meant personally, socially, and economically.

Whilst *Portrait of a Lady* is a Realist novel, then, there is something about that metaphor of the 'house of fiction' which breaks with its conventions. In a useful study, Elizabeth Ermath has defined Realism as 'an aesthetic form of consensus', in which all the diverse characters and viewpoints tend to come into agreement. Realism, she suggests, 'homogenises the medium of experience and thus objectifies a common world'.[11] For the narrator to unify different perspectives, there has to be stability and confidence—perhaps as there is in the omniscient narrative voice in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872), pulling all the threads of the town together. In James's 'house of fiction', however, it is not clear that the view from each window could ever be synthesized into an overall vision. Indeed, James famously defined experience in 'The Art of Fiction' as an intensely subjective thing, 'an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue'. For James, 'experience consists of impressions'.[12] This sounds very much like Walter Pater's declarations at the end of his celebrated book of essays, *The Renaissance* (1873), in which the reader was commanded 'to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions' in order to experience 'a quickened, multiplied consciousness'.[13] What Pater signalled was the beginning of an epochal change in art, for his appeal anticipated the experiment in radically subjective vision we associate with the Impressionist art of Claude Monet or Paul Cézanne. 'Impressionism encouraged an artist to paint a tree as it appeared to him at the moment under particular circumstances,' the art critic Desmond McCarthy tried to explain in 1910. 'It insisted so much upon the importance of his rendering his exact impression that his work often completely failed to express a tree at all, as transferred to the canvas it was just so much shimmer and colour.'[14] Here, in a nutshell, was the provocation of Modernism: the undermining of objective reality or that representation should be judged by its verisimilitude, instead venerating subjective experience. *The Portrait of a Lady* pointed forward to

this too, and Ermath uses James as the figure who 'strains the consensus of realism to breaking-point'.[15]

This surely accounts for some of the oddities of the novel's structure. The novel begins with an overall narrator, setting a scene in the grounds of Gardencourt and slowly zooming in on its figures. A debonair, witty narrative voice directs us in our judgement of these characters, undercutting Isabel's forthright comments with an ironic voice of experience. The omniscient narration slips in and out of the perspectives of Isabel, Mrs Touchett, Ralph, and others with sinuous ease. This is the narrative device of Realism. Yet somewhere around Chapter XVIII, with the arrival of Madame Merle, the narrative tactics change. Crucial information is withheld from the reader, whilst our knowledge of the jaws of the trap around Isabel grows. Then James makes his most audacious structural decision: he leaps forward in time, so that we fail to witness her momentous decision to marry Osmond. This is perverse, after the acres of time given over to her rejection of her competing suitors: we surely need to know her thought-process. As if this weren't strange enough, we then leap forward again three years into her marriage and for the space of four long chapters we are left outside Isabel's consciousness, seeing her only as guests to the Palazzo Roccanera might, guessing at what might be happening behind the mask of the accomplished society hostess. We know she has suffered the death of a baby; we suspect the marriage may not be happy; we are given no clue. When the reader is finally allowed to return to her consciousness, in Chapter XL, it leads up to one of the most sustained subjective reveries in English literature in Chapter XLII, a subjectivity conceived less through social conceptions than metaphors of depths plumbed or complex interior spaces explored. From this point on, the overall narrator virtually falls away, the irony disappears: we regard the world principally from the perspective of Isabel. The novel has shifted in strange leaps from consensual Realism to the single window of Isabel's extended consciousness. Even so, her very last, critical decision, whether or not to return to her husband in Italy, is left outside our knowledge. We only hear of her decision and are left to imagine the consequences in the space left by her absence.

This accounts for the complaints of some contemporary reviewers that for an alleged exhaustive portrait, the novel fell oddly short. 'The central figure remains shrouded in mist,' R. H. Hutton complained; 'the reader never sees her, or realises what she is.'[16] Modern critics observe the same effect, J. Hillis Miller pointing to the 'systematic nonrepresentation of Isabel's crucial moments of decision',[17] only here to praise James's clever occlusions. The Victorian Hutton was bewildered by the refusal to represent all the conventional novelistic turning points, but in the wake of the Modernist revolution in plot, perspective, and character James's experiment in viewpoint makes much more sense. James takes much of the later Preface to explain his perspectival gamble, placing 'the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness' whilst minimizing what he called the 'satellites' around her (pp. 11–12).

The house of fiction built by *Portrait* is therefore both Realist and Impressionist—doubled, like the frontage of Isabel's Albany home. And if there is an argument that *Portrait* is at once Victorian and Modern, it is no surprise that James in effect left us two distinct versions of the novel, the one serialized in 1880 to 1881 and the one he substantially revised for the New York Edition published in 1908. 'There are two *Portraits*, not one,' the critic Anthony Mazzella claims, each 'a different literary experience'.[18] For a long time, it was assumed that the New York Edition must be the superior text, since it was the most complete statement of the author's intent. The thousands of often very minor changes James made have been likened to tiny dabs of a brush that heighten the brilliance of the portrait. In particular, James added leitmotifs, associated with each of the central characters—the clanking armour of Caspar Goodwood, the technological modernity of Henrietta Stackpole, the medals and coins evoked by Gilbert Osmond's profile. The later version renders Goodwood's demand for marriage more forceful and openly phallic and Isabel's confusion in his presence more explicitly one of sexual panic. Conversations are clipped, often rendered more enigmatic, in the typical late Jamesian style. Yet some have objected to these amendments, complaining that a social novel about the woman question is turned into an airless psychological drama, Isabel transformed from an emotional force into an agonizing, over-subtle intellectual.[19] This Oxford edition uses the New York text revised in the summer of 1906 that was published with its Preface in 1908, but the notes try to indicate the handful of truly significant changes James made. Without getting too obsessed with these changes, one moment to reflect on the process of revision is that central occlusion of the plot, the marriage of Isabel to Gilbert Osmond. In Chapter XXIX (p. 306 below), James cut two long paragraphs mixing Gilbert's reflections with direct address to the reader from the narrative voice. The paragraphs are reproduced in the notes as one of the strongest examples of how the revisions worked over a Victorian novel, complete with strong interventions from the narrative voice, and rewrote it as a Modern one, where we are elliptically shown rather than explicitly told about character motivation.

One thing the changes did not touch was the shape of the novel's design. The architecture was carefully proportioned in every respect, not least in the graceful distribution of 'satellites' around the central figure.

Character Patterns

This is a novel about a woman's choice. Isabel's naïvety is her optimistic American belief in self-determination. In Europe, however, a woman is variously constrained by the ties of history, breeding, culture, and convention. Arrayed before Isabel are a sequence of men who seek her attentions for various ends: Ralph Touchett, Caspar Goodwood, Lord Warburton, Gilbert Osmond, Ned Rosier. The women satellites—Mrs Touchett, Henrietta, Madame Merle, Pansy—present a spectrum of possible modes of feminine living. These character studies are intricately patterned to reinforce the central theme, often in contrasting pairs.

The suitors Goodwood and Warburton are American and English national types. James once professed that he centred his fictions so often on women because 'before the American business-man, as I have been prompt to declare, I was absolutely and irredeemably helpless, with no fibre of my intelligence responding to his mystery'.[20] Goodwood simply exerts the steely will of American capitalism, and the New York Edition eliminates any doubt or ambiguity in his character to present him as an implacable, thrusting force of demand. Isabel's rejection of his advances is tied to her recognition that he will obliterate any sense of freedom or intellectual play; later touches suggest Isabel might also fear the annihilating rush of desire she senses stirring in herself. Lord Warburton's threat is more subtle for such an essentially benign figure. Whilst Goodwood is careless of social niceties and even, in his scandalous final appeal, of others' marital vows, Warburton encapsulates solid English tradition. His house, significantly named Lockleigh and surrounded by a defensive moat, evokes the weight of aristocratic patrimony, and his bland and timid sisters are a devastating portrait of the likely destiny for any feisty American Girl marrying into a title.

The pairing of Ralph Touchett and Gilbert Osmond is more complex and sustained. Ultimately, James places them at opposite ends of the moral spectrum, yet they share many similarities. Both are unconventional, Europeanized Americans; both are unmasculine in their rejection of business; both are art connoisseurs, who have amassed valuable private collections; both, in different ways, love Isabel, but equally regard her as a kind of artistic experiment in the formation of character. At core, these two figures allow James to stage a debate about the morality of Aestheticism and thus help him to declare his own view of the ethics of the art of the novel.

When James began to serialize *The Portrait of a Lady*, the Aesthetic Movement was at its height. Max Beerbohm satirically recalled 1880 as the year when 'first society was inducted into the mysteries of art and, not losing yet its old and elegant tenue, babbled of blue china and white lilies, of the painter Rossetti and the poet Swinburne'.[21] The moral earnestness of John Ruskin was replaced by the passionate intensities of Walter Pater. Oscar Wilde was in his first flush of fame in London and became the target of George du Maurier's satirical cartoons of swooning, pretentious worshippers of Beauty in *Punch*. Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *Patience* satirized Wilde and the movement in 1881; the opera company then employed Wilde to dress up in outrageous dandy costumes to advertise the show across America. In *Portrait*, Ned Rosier is clearly a representative of 'chinamania', obsessed with his collection of knick-knacks, but Gilbert Osmond is James's central study of the danger and allure of the Wildean aesthete. Osmond feigns decadent ennui at the vulgarity of the bourgeoisie, and his modest, private museum in his cloistered house above Florence seems to Isabel a symbol of perfect taste. She is taken with him precisely because he does not conform to the typology that so easily places Goodwood and Warburton—the aesthete is a self-creation, 'the elegant complicated medal struck off for a special occasion' (p. 233). The structure of the novel, however, allows the reader to see the nature (if not the true extent) of Osmond's pose from the beginning. He is obsessed with money and position and Isabel's fortune is a route to securing it. The courtship is a cynical effort of will. He is less a person than an absence, nearly always defined by strings of negatives: 'I could do nothing. I had no prospects, I was poor, and I was not a man of genius. I had no talents even' (p. 268). After the marriage, his social triumph at Palazzo Roccanera is to host lavish evening entertainments largely to snub the uninvited, so petty is his social conformity. It is no wonder that we last see him patiently copying the design of an ancient coin. Disinterested, beautiful art is always part of a ruthless cash-nexus. Osmond even becomes something of the Gothic monster of Protestant fiction in his treatment of his daughter Pansy, locking her up in a convent until she learns to behave as the appropriate bauble of art in her father's collection.

James was often appalled by Oscar Wilde's reckless career in art and life. In *Portrait*, Osmond

composes a sonnet for Isabel, 'Rome Revisited', that echoes Wilde's 'Rome Unvisited' and Osmond's mother bears more than a passing resemblance to Lady Wilde, who considered herself a national poet and began holding a famous salon in London in 1879.[22] Yet Wilde was only one possible source for Osmond, and Wilde did not completely represent the Aesthetic Movement. Indeed, James did not reject the movement outright for he was the advocate of a different expression of Aestheticism that he communicated through Ralph Touchett.

Ralph typifies the unproductive, effeminate aesthete, rejecting his father's world of banking and his mother's joyless American Puritanism. Yet this is for honourable reasons: he is dying of tuberculosis and has dedicated his remaining years to Beauty. The reader is meant to discern, I think, that his taste is *truly* exquisite—his collection of paintings is small, but stuffed with small gems by Tancred and Bonington. He loves Gardencourt not for its symbolic social status as an English country house, but for the undemonstrative beauty of its proportions. He is devoted to his father, and responds to Isabel strictly as an aesthete—to her abstract beauty and her quick intelligence. Ralph's advice to her as she leaves England for France sounds like the sort of send-off Walter Pater might have given: 'Don't try so much to form your character—it's like trying to pull open a tight, tender young rose. Live as you like best, and your character will take care of itself. Most things are good for you; the exceptions are very rare' (p. 227). There is no moralism here, only the injunction to have wide experience and thus enrich consciousness. Even so, the disaster of Isabel's marriage is inadvertently created by Ralph's experiment in engineering for her the fortune that he thinks will give her complete freedom. He is merely another cog in the mechanism of intrigue that controls Isabel's life. He treats her as an artwork to be completed, as 'the finest entertainment', failing to gather that money will contaminate everything. Ralph is not condemned, however, for ultimately the suffering she must endure in Palazzo Roccanera is the very thing that rounds out her subjectivity and completes the portrait of a lady. There is a scene of redemption for both Ralph and Isabel when she returns to Gardencourt in the closing pages of the novel.

This structural pairing therefore allows James to denounce Osmond's cynicism, sickly taste, and tyrannical exertion of his will and assert instead an aestheticism premised on an ethics of openness, mutuality, and generosity. As Isabel steers between these men, she eventually comes to represent everything James thought the novel might itself achieve: ethics and aesthetics merge seamlessly.

James structures the women satellites in similar elegant proportions, pairing Isabel with a sequence of women characters until the book suggests a spectrum of possible ways in which she might live. In the early chapters, a light ironic touch hovers around the thumbnail sketches of Lord Warburton's sisters or Henrietta's strident (and hopeless) endeavour to grasp the 'inner life' of Europe. As the shadows grow, the novel offers a bleak scale of failed or frozen marriages in varying shades of grey. Mr and Mrs Touchett reach an accommodation by living separate lives in different countries. Osmond's sister, the Countess Gemini, exists in such a scandalous open marriage that respectable houses will not tolerate her. Serena Merle's husband is dead, but was plainly dissolute—rather as, it is implied, was Isabel's father. Madame Merle's sinister strategies for survival as an impoverished widow with a dangerous secret seems the model of Old World sophistication—or at least a good impersonation of it, since like Gilbert Osmond, she comes from the disreputable badlands of America. In the end, however, Merle's pose is stripped away and she is left deserving only of Isabel's expansive pity. Love matches, as between Ned Rosier and Pansy, are ruthlessly broken on the wheel of financial calculation and social expectation. Pansy becomes the emblem of female obeisance, her will utterly abolished.

The plotting revolves obsessively around marriage proposals but steadfastly overturns the traditional novel plot that regarded marriage as a narrative endpoint of harmonious closure. That Lord Warburton appears again in the second half of the book for another doomed courtship even suggests a sort of hellish repetition. In *Portrait*, marriage does not 'complete' a man or woman but appears to promise only new levels of suffering. For all the opprobrium dumped on Henrietta Stackpole's horrid modernity, her marriage to the decent buffoon Bantling remains a rare, if deeply ironic, light note.

Amid this distribution of characters, Isabel's room for manoeuvre as a Victorian woman is carefully demarcated. James orchestrates the revelations about the truth behind the machinations of Gilbert Osmond, Madame Merle, and others to bring Isabel to the point where she is morally justified in leaving her monstrous husband. This again spoke to very contemporary concerns. Whilst *Portrait* was being serialized through 1880–1, the English parliament was debating the Married Woman's Property Act. This was eventually passed (after thirteen years of blocked attempts) in 1882. Hitherto, a woman's wealth and property moved from her father to her husband on marriage, and the new law struck a blow at 'the necessary subordination of a woman's will to that of her husband'. It was, Mary Shanley declares, 'the single most important change in the legal status of women in the nineteenth century'.[23] For English

readers, Isabel's choices were being transformed in the year the serialization unfolded.

In the closing chapters of *Portrait*, Isabel has plumbed the depths of the deceit of her husband and defied his will by returning to England to see Ralph on his deathbed. Perhaps James's most audacious narrative occlusion is in cutting out any access to Isabel's final decision on whether to return to Rome and to Osmond. We only discover through Henrietta that she has left for the Continent. Henrietta's last ambiguous piece of advice to Goodwood—'Just you wait'—caused a little offence at the time. 'We consider', Trevor Creighton said in 1884, 'the suggestion of Isabel's future moral lapse quite inconsistent with her fine character, and that it lowers the ethical value of this clever novel.'[24] In keeping with the legal debates of the era, Creighton judged Isabel to have no grounds for such a momentous step as divorce. For modern readers, the pull is likely to be in the opposite direction: why on earth would Isabel apparently consent to return to the living death of the Palazzo Roccanera? To begin to answer why James ends the novel in this way, let's turn finally to the other metaphor that dominates the novel: the painted portrait.

Frames for the Picture

In *Portrait*, painting and art measure the refinement of sensibility. Isabel can at first see only 'vague squares of rich colour' in Ralph's gallery of artworks because she has no visual training (p. 58). When she returns, she stands before a Bonington landscape, lost in deep reverie. Unlike Goodwood or Henrietta, her rather insensate countrymen, she has learnt to *see*. Yet Isabel is rarely allowed to be the subject who gazes; more often she is the objectified piece of art. Ralph compares her to 'a Greek bas-relief . . . a great Titian . . . a Gothic cathedral' (p. 75) and the narrator describes her as making 'a graceful and harmonious image' on the lawn at Gardencourt (p. 111). Worse still, such artworks accrue exchange value. Osmond finds Isabel 'qualified to figure in his collection of choice objects' (p. 304), whilst Ned Rosier compares Pansy to Dresden china and weighs her worth against his collection of bibelots. Isabel, it should be said, also indulges in this aesthetic objectification: she thinks of Osmond's 'retouched features' as a picture that 'had no flourishes, but she liked its lowness of tone and the atmosphere of summer twilight that pervaded it' (p. 280).

What James values in art and life is openness and genuine mutuality, the enriched consciousness of wide sympathies. Isabel is constantly warned that she risks stepping into a cage and the box of a cage might just as well be represented by the closed frame that contains the picture. Donatella Izzo is right to note that the metaphor of the painted portrait 'alludes to an enclosed form, which the frame ostensibly isolates from the surrounding reality'.[25]

Yet to what kind of portrait does James aspire? A clue comes in James's short essay on the American painter John Singer Sargent (the artist was later commissioned to paint James's own portrait on his seventieth birthday). As James observed, Sargent worked 'almost exclusively in portraiture' of women but in the suggestive, Impressionist mode: 'He is various and experimental; if I am not mistaken, he sees each work that he produces in a light of its own, and does not turn off successive portraits according to some well-tried receipt.'[26] In the essay, James praises the startlingly odd framing of the *Boit Sisters* portrait (1883–4) and rejects criticism of Sargent's 'want of "finish"'.[27] What emerges is a new kind of portraiture. The painting is hesitant, sketchy, the figures strangely arrayed and hauntingly incomplete. Nevertheless, they leave you with a lasting impression. David Lubin, reading Sargent and James together, has suggested that both artists are at the forefront in the 1880s of developing a new aesthetic in which the portrait begins to foreground 'the revelation and interpretation of a specific, delimited human identity' rather than the traditional demand that the portrait convey achievement, rank, or social standing. This is a new 'psychologically individuating portraiture'.[28]

Isabel Archer puzzled those who expected a conventional, social portrait typical of Victorian mainstream art. There was—to adapt the metaphor—a want of finish. This was something of which James was fully aware, writing in his notebook:

> The obvious criticism of course will be that it is not finished—that I have not seen the heroine to the end of her situation—that I have left her *en l'air*.—This is both true and false. The *whole* of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together. What I have done has that unity—it groups together. It is complete in itself—and the rest may be taken up or not, later.[29]

This is the key to James's puzzling narrative occlusions and the final irresolution of the novel. Many characters have worked to close Isabel inside the square of a frame. Yet as the philosopher Jacques

Derrida observes in *The Truth in Painting*, a frame is always doubleedged, closing off the artwork but also opening it up to the context in which it must be viewed.[30] Isabel escapes our final observation in the last pages because in keeping with her now very different conception of freedom the frame must be left incomplete, never quite able to close around our elusive heroine. From this busted frame Isabel evades final determination and James leads us towards the era of the modern novel.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The Portrait of a Lady was published in twelve parts in *Atlantic Monthly* in America and one month later in *Macmillan's Magazine* in England, from 1880 to 1881. It was published as a novel in 1881. In the summer of 1906, Henry James returned to the novel and extensively revised it for the 24–volume New York Edition of his work. He made thousands of small corrections, a handful of major ones, and published it complete with his newly composed Preface in 1908.

This edition uses the New York Edition. To detail all the changes would be a disruptive process for the Oxford World's Classics reader. However, the Explanatory Notes signal some of the important changes made by James between 1881 and 1906 and the significance of some of these revisions is discussed in the Introduction and Explanatory Notes.

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A CHRONOLOGY OF HENRY JAMES

1843 Born 15 April, New York City into family who inherited wealth from industrialist and banking grandfather.

1844 Henry James Sr experiences a religious 'vision' which prompts further elaboration of his eccentric religious views and beliefs on raising children. Close friendship with Transcendentalist philosopher Emerson and immersion in teachings of visionary Swedenborg. The father's instability causes constant disruption to family life.

1855–8 Father moves family restlessly through European cities including Geneva, Paris, London.

1858 Family settles in Newport. Aspirant painter John La Farge introduces HJ to work of Balzac and Browning.

1859 Another aborted attempt by family to live in Europe: HJ schools in Geneva and Bonn.

1861–5 American Civil War. Elder sons William and Henry do not enlist, HJ blaming the 'obscure hurt' that dominates his childhood; the youngest sons, Wilky and Bob, do fight against the South and are wounded and traumatized by their service.

1862 Brief attempt to study law at Harvard.

1864 First short story published and begins career as reviewer and essayist in *North American Review* and *The Nation*.

1865 First serious 'nervous' illness of sister, Alice James. First signed story by HJ published in *Atlantic Monthly*.

1866 Forms close friendship with William Dean Howells, Realist novelist and editor at *Atlantic*.

1867 Brother William James suffers severe depression and travels in Europe.

1868 HJ suffers several months of 'nervous' prostration.

1869 Visits London on his first lone trip abroad, meeting John Ruskin, William Morris, George Eliot. He then travels to Geneva, the Alps, Venice, and Rome.

1870 Death of cousin Minny Temple in her early twenties from tuberculosis, a loss that haunts HJ's writing life. First novel, *Watch and Ward*

1872 Travels in Europe with sister, Alice.

1874–5 Year in New York, writing journalism and publishing *Transatlantic Sketches*, *A Passionate Pilgrim*, and *Roderick Hudson*.

1875–6 Year in Paris, initially as *Tribune* correspondent. Through Flaubert's salon meets key modern writers Ivan Turgenev, Émile Zola, Alphonse Daudet, Edmond de Goncourt. Visits first exhibition of Independents, soon to become known as the Impressionists. Forms passionate attachment to Paul Joukowsky, set-designer for Richard Wagner's operas. George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* published, a key novel for HJ. Serialization of *The American*.

1876 Abandons Paris for London, where he settles. Meets John Addington Symonds and Robert Browning and joins Athenaeum and Savile clubs.

1876–82 Enters most productive era of career, writing hundreds of essays and reviews, publishing *The Europeans*, *Confidence*, *Washington Square*, and studies of French literature and the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne. At heart of English literary and social establishment.

1878 *Daisy Miller* becomes an international success. Severe mental collapse of Alice James.

1880–1 Serialization of *The Portrait of a Lady* in England and America.

1881 Alice travels to England with her carer/lover, Katherine Loring.

1882 Death of parents; HJ as executor in US for winter 1882–3. Howells declares HJ the writer of the age, superseding Dickens and Thackeray. This prompts a backlash in English critics.

1883 Death of younger brother, Wilkie. The novelist Constance Fenimore Woolson lives near HJ in London.

1884 Alice arrives in London, with severe breakdown. Will stay near HJ in Europe for remainder of her life. Alice in Bournemouth, where HJ also visits the invalid Robert Louis Stevenson. Writes response to Walter Besant's lecture 'The Art of Fiction'. First translation of Émile Zola's *Nana: A Realistic Novel* causes outrage.

1885 *The Bostonians*, less successful than expected. George Moore attacks moral conservatism of the novel form in England in *Literature at Nurse*, blaming the influence of circulating libraries.

1886 *The Princess Casamassima*, a commercial failure.

1887 Sublets part of Villa Brichieri above Florence from writer Constance Fenimore Woolson, an arrangement both kept secret. Writes 'The Aspern Papers' during this time.

1888 Financial anxieties push HJ to publish *The Reverberator*, *The Tragic Muse*, *A London Life* as well as essays and short stories. The failure of *Muse* results in HJ abandoning the long novel for over a decade. Another concealed trip with Woolson to Geneva.

1889 Passionate attachment to American journalist and writer Jonathan Sturges.

1890 HJ begins attempts to write for theatre, in hope of financial security. Minor success with adaptation of *The American*. William James publishes *The Principles of Psychology*.

1892 Death of Alice James, from cancer.

1894 Suicide of Constance Fenimore Woolson. Travels to Venice to visit her lodgings and dispose of her possessions. Writes 'Altar of the Dead' in her Oxford rooms.

1895 Humiliation at failure of his play, *Guy Domville*. It rapidly closes, to be replaced by Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (two months later, Wilde is arrested and tried for 'acts of gross indecency'). The theatrical failure is seen by some to prompt HJ's 'late style'. 'The Figure in the Carpet' one of the first short stories in this style.

1896–7 *The Spoils of Poynton*, *What Maisie Knew*, first novels since 1890.

1898 Moves from London to Lamb House, Rye, in Sussex. Near neighbours include H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Stephen Crane, and Joseph Conrad. 'The Turn of the Screw' published.

1899 Travels to Italy. Meets sculptor Hendrik Andersen, with whom he conducts a passionate, largely epistolatory friendship over the next five years.

1900 *The Awkward Age*, *The Sacred Fount*.

1902–4 Publishes *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*, his last completed novels. Friendship with young Jocelyn Persse.

1903 Meets Edith Wharton.

1905 Journey through America after twenty-year absence, including invitation to White House. Begins work on *The American Scene*.

1905–8 Edits, revises, and writes introductions for 24 volumes of the New York Edition of his work. Meant to secure a large return, it was a financial disaster.

1910 Death of brothers Bob and William. Suffers illness and depression for two years.

1913 Writes autobiographies, *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, the latter a publishing success.

1914 Public dispute with H. G. Wells over future of the novel. On outbreak of Great War, HJ works as volunteer visiting sick and soon campaigns for American entry to war.

1915 Becomes British citizen, as gesture of support for war.

1916 Awarded Order of Merit. Died 28 February. His funeral took place in Chelsea Old Church and his ashes were carried to the family plot in Cambridge, Mass.

THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY

PREFACE

'THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY' was, like 'Roderick Hudson,' begun in Florence, during three months spent there in the spring of 1879. Like 'Roderick' and like 'The American,' it had been designed for publication in 'The Atlantic Monthly,' where it began to appear in 188o. It differed from its two predecessors, however, in finding a course also open to it, from month to month, in 'Macmillan's Magazine'; which was to be for me one of the last occasions of simultaneous 'serialisation' in the two countries that the changing conditions of literary intercourse between England and the United States had up to then left unaltered. It is a long novel, and I was long in writing it; I remember being again much occupied with it, the following year, during a stay of several weeks made in Venice. I had rooms on Riva Schiavoni, at the top of a house near the passage leading off to San Zaccaria;* the waterside life, the wondrous lagoon spread before me, and the ceaseless human chatter of Venice came in at my windows, to which I seem to myself to have been constantly driven, in the fruitless fidget of composition, as if to see whether, out in the blue channel, the ship of some right suggestion, of some better phrase, of the next happy twist of my subject, the next true touch for my canvas, mightn't come into sight. But I recall vividly enough that the response most elicited, in general, to these restless appeals was the rather grim admonition that romantic and historic sites, such as the land of Italy abounds in, offer the artist a questionable aid to concentration when they themselves are not to be the subject of it. They are too rich in their own life and too charged with their own meanings merely to help him out with a lame phrase; they draw him away from his small question to their own greater ones; so that, after a little, he feels, while thus yearning toward them in his difficulty, as if he were asking an army of glorious veterans to help him to arrest a peddler who has given him the wrong change.

There are pages of the book which, in the reading over, have seemed to make me see again the bristling curve of the wide Riva, the large colour-spots of the balconied houses and the repeated undulation of the little hunchbacked bridges, marked by the rise and drop again, with the wave, of foreshortened clicking pedestrians. The Venetian footfall and the Venetian cry—all talk there, wherever uttered, having the pitch of a call across the water—come in once more at the window, renewing one's old impression of the delighted senses and the divided, frustrated mind. How can places that speak *in general* so to the imagination not give it, at the moment, the particular thing it wants? I recollect again and again, in beautiful places, dropping into that wonderment. The real truth is, I think, that they express, under this appeal, only too much—more than, in the given case, one has use for; so that one finds one's self working less congruously, after all, so far as the surrounding picture is concerned, than in presence of the moderate and the neutral, to which we may lend something of the light of our vision. Such a place as Venice is too proud for such charities; Venice doesn't borrow, she but all magnificently gives. We profit by that enormously, but to do so we must either be quite off duty or be on it in her service alone. Such, and so rueful, are these reminiscences; though on the whole, no doubt, one's book, and one's 'literary effort' at large, were to be the better for them. Strangely fertilising, in the long run, does a wasted effort of attention often prove. It all depends on *how* the attention has been cheated, has been squandered. There are high-handed insolent frauds, and there are insidious sneaking ones. And there is, I fear, even on the most designing artist's part, always witless enough good faith, always anxious enough desire, to fail to guard him against their deceits.

Trying to recover here, for recognition, the germ of my idea, I see that it must have consisted not at all in any conceit of a 'plot,' nefarious name, in any flash, upon the fancy, of a set of relations, or in any one of those situations that, by a logic of their own, immediately fall, for the fabulist, into movement, into a march or a rush, a patter of quick steps; but altogether in the sense of a single character, the character and aspect of a particular engaging young woman, to which all the usual elements of a 'subject,' certainly of a setting, were to need to be super-added. Quite as interesting as the young woman herself, at her best, do I find, I must again repeat, this projection of memory upon the whole matter of the growth, in one's imagination, of some such apology for a motive. These are the fascinations of the fabulist's art, these lurking forces of expansion, these necessities of upspringing in the seed, these beautiful determinations, on the part of the idea entertained, to grow as tall as possible, to push into the light and the air and thickly flower there; and, quite as much, these fine possibilities of recovering, from some good standpoint on the ground gained, the intimate history of the business—of retracing and reconstructing its steps and stages. I have always fondly remembered a remark that I heard fall years ago

from the lips of Ivan Turgenieff * in regard to his own experience of the usual origin of the fictive picture. It began for him almost always with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him, as the active or passive figure, interesting him and appealing to him just as they were and by what they were. He saw them, in that fashion, as *disponibles*,* saw them subject to the chances, the complications of existence, and saw them vividly, but then had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out; to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves, the complications they would be most likely to produce and to feel.

'To arrive at these things is to arrive at my "story,"' he said, 'and that's the way I look for it. The result is that I'm often accused of not having "story" enough. I seem to myself to have as much as I need—to show my people, to exhibit their relations with each other; for that is all my measure. If I watch them long enough I see them come together, I see them *placed*, I see them engaged in this or that act and in this or that difficulty. How they look and move and speak and behave, always in the setting I have found for them, is my account of them—of which I dare say, alas, *que cela manque souvent d'architecture*.* But I would rather, I think, have too little architecture than too much—when there's danger of its interfering with my measure of the truth. The French of course like more of it than I give—having by their own genius such a hand for it; and indeed one must give all one can. As for the origin of one's wind-blown germs themselves, who shall say, as you ask, where *they* come from? We have to go too far back, too far behind, to say. Isn't it all we can say that they come from every quarter of heaven, that they are *there* at almost any turn of the road? They accumulate, and we are always picking them over, selecting among them. They are the breath of life—by which I mean that life, in its own way, breathes them upon us. They are so, in a manner prescribed and imposed—floated into our minds by the current of life. That reduces to imbecility the vain critic's quarrel, so often, with one's subject, when he hasn't the wit to accept it. Will he point out then which other it should properly have been?—his office being, essentially *to* point out. *Il en serait bien embarrassé*.* Ah, when he points out what I've done or failed to do with it, that's another matter: there he's on his ground. I give him up my "architecture,"' my distinguished friend concluded, 'as much as he will.'

So this beautiful genius, and I recall with comfort the gratitude I drew from his reference to the intensity of suggestion that may reside in the stray figure, the unattached character, the image *en disponibilité*.* It gave me higher warrant than I seemed then to have met for just that blest habit of one's own imagination, the trick of investing some conceived or encountered individual, some brace or group of individuals, with the germinal property and authority. I was myself so much more antecedently conscious of my figures than of their setting—a too preliminary, a preferential interest in which struck me as in general such a putting of the cart before the horse. I might envy, though I couldn't emulate, the imaginative writer so constituted as to see his fable first and to make out its agents afterwards: I could think so little of any fable that didn't need its agents positively to launch it; I could think so little of any situation that didn't depend for its interest on the nature of the persons situated, and thereby on their way of taking it. There are methods of so-called presentation, I believe—among novelists who have appeared to flourish—that offer the situation as indifferent to that support; but I have not lost the sense of the value for me, at the time, of the admirable Russian's testimony to my not needing, all superstitiously, to try and perform any such gymnastic. Other echoes from the same source linger with me, I confess, as unfadingly—if it be not all indeed one much-embracing echo. It was impossible after that not to read, for one's uses, high lucidity into the tormented and disfigured and bemuddled question of the objective value, and even quite into that of the critical appreciation, of 'subject' in the novel.

One had had from an early time, for that matter, the instinct of the right estimate of such values and of its reducing to the inane the dull dispute over the 'immoral' subject and the moral. Recognising so promptly the one measure of the worth of a given subject, the question about it that, rightly answered, disposes of all others—is it valid, in a word, is it genuine, is it sincere, the result of some direct impression or perception of life?—I had found small edification, mostly, in a critical pretension that had neglected from the first all delimitation of ground and all definition of terms. The air of my earlier time shows, to memory, as darkened, all round, with that vanity—unless the difference to-day be just in one's own final impatience, the lapse of one's attention. There is, I think, no more nutritive or suggestive truth in this connexion than that of the perfect dependence of the 'moral' sense of a work of art on the amount of felt life concerned in producing it. The question comes back thus, obviously, to the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs. The quality and capacity of that soil, its ability to 'grow' with due freshness and straightness any vision of life, represents, strongly or weakly, the projected morality. That element is but another name for the more or less close connexion of the subject with some mark made on the intelligence, with some sincere experience. By which, at the

same time, of course, one is far from contending that this enveloping air of the artist's humanity—which gives the last touch to the worth of the work—is not a widely and wondrously varying element; being on one occasion a rich and magnificent medium and on another a comparatively poor and ungenerous one. Here we get exactly the high price of the novel as a literary form—its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life, of disposition to reflect and project, created by conditions that are never the same from man to man (or, so far as that goes, from man to woman), but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould.

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbours are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular pair of eyes, the window may *not* open; 'fortunately' by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range. The spreading field, the human scene, is the 'choice of subject'; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the 'literary form'; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist. Tell me what the artist is, and I will tell you of what he has *been* conscious. Thereby I shall express to you at once his boundless freedom and his 'moral' reference.

All this is a long way round, however, for my word about my dim first move toward 'The Portrait,' which was exactly my grasp of a single character—an acquisition I had made, moreover, after a fashion not here to be retraced. Enough that I was, as seemed to me, in complete possession of it, that I had been so for a long time, that this had made it familiar and yet had not blurred its charm, and that, all urgently, all tormentingly, I saw it in motion and, so to speak, in transit. This amounts to saying that I saw it as bent upon its fate—some fate or other; *which*, among the possibilities, being precisely the question. Thus I had my vivid individual—vivid, so strangely, in spite of being still at large, not confined by the conditions, not engaged in the tangle, to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes an identity. If the apparition was still all to be placed how came it to be vivid?—since we puzzle such quantities out, mostly, just by the business of placing them. One could answer such a question beautifully, doubtless, if one could do so subtle, if not so monstrous, a thing as to write the history of the growth of one's imagination. One would describe then what, at a given time, had extraordinarily happened to it, and one would so, for instance, be in a position to tell, with an approach to clearness, how, under favour of occasion, it had been able to take over (take over straight from life) such and such a constituted, animated figure or form. The figure has to that extent, as you see, *been* placed—placed in the imagination that detains it, preserves, protects, enjoys it, conscious of its presence in the dusky, crowded, heterogeneous back-shop of the mind very much as a wary dealer* in precious odds and ends, competent to make an 'advance' on rare objects confided to him, is conscious of the rare little 'piece' left in deposit by the reduced, mysterious lady of title or the speculative amateur, and which is already there to disclose its merit afresh as soon as a key shall have clicked in a cupboard-door.

That may be, I recognise, a somewhat superfine analogy for the particular 'value' I here speak of, the image of the young feminine nature that I had had for so considerable a time all curiously at my disposal; but it appears to fond memory quite to fit the fact—with the recall, in addition, of my pious desire but to place my treasure right. I quite remind myself thus of the dealer resigned not to 'realise,' resigned to keeping the precious object locked up indefinitely rather than commit it, at no matter what price, to vulgar hands. For there *are* dealers in these forms and figures and treasures capable of that refinement. The point is, however, that this single small cornerstone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny, had begun with being all my outfit for the large building of 'The Portrait of a Lady.' It came to be a square and spacious house—or has at least seemed so to me in this going over it again; but, such as it is, it had to be put up round my young woman while she stood there in perfect isolation. That is to me, artistically speaking, the circumstance of interest; for I have lost myself once more, I confess, in the curiosity of analysing the structure. By what process of logical accretion was this

slight ‘personality,’ the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl, to find itself endowed with the high attributes of a Subject?—and indeed by what thinness, at the best, would such a subject not be vitiated? Millions of presumptuous girls, intelligent or not intelligent, daily affront their destiny, and what is it open to their destiny to *be*, at the most, that we should make an ado about it? The novel is of its very nature an ‘ado,’ an ado about something, and the larger the form it takes the greater of course the ado. Therefore, consciously, that was what one was in for—for positively organising an ado about Isabel Archer.

One looked it well in the face, I seem to remember, this extravagance; and with the effect precisely of recognising the charm of the problem. Challenge any such problem with any intelligence, and you immediately see how full it is of substance; the wonder being, all the while, as we look at the world, how absolutely, how inordinately, the Isabel Archers, and even much smaller female fry, insist on mattering. George Eliot has admirably noted it—‘In these frail vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection.’* In ‘Romeo and Juliet’ Juliet has to be important, just as, in ‘Adam Bede’ and ‘The Mill on the Floss’ and ‘Middlemarch’ and ‘Daniel Deronda,’ Hetty Sorrel and Maggie Tulliver and Rosamond Vincy and Gwendolen Harleth have to be; with that much of firm ground, that much of bracing air, at the disposal all the while of their feet and their lungs. They are typical, none the less, of a class difficult, in the individual case, to make a centre of interest; so difficult in fact that many an expert painter, as for instance Dickens and Walter Scott, as for instance even, in the main, so subtle a hand as that of R. L. Stevenson, has preferred to leave the task unattempted.* There are in fact writers as to whom we make out that their refuge from this is to assume it to be not worth their attempting; by which pusillanimity in truth their honour is scantly saved. It is never an attestation of a value, or even of our imperfect sense of one, it is never a tribute to any truth at all, that we shall represent that value badly. It never makes up, artistically, for an artist’s dim feeling about a thing that he shall ‘do’ the thing as ill as possible. There are better ways than that, the best of all of which is to begin with less stupidity.

It may be answered meanwhile, in regard to Shakespeare’s and to George Eliot’s testimony, that their concession to the ‘importance’ of their Juliets and Cleopatras and Portias (even with Portia as the very type and model of the young person intelligent and presumptuous) and to that of their Hettys and Maggies and Rosamonds and Gwendolens, suffers the abatement that these slimnesses are, when figuring as the main props of the theme, never suffered to be sole ministers of its appeal, but have their inadequacy eked out with comic relief and underplots, as the playwrights say, when not with murders and battles and the great mutations of the world. If they are shown as ‘mattering’ as much as they could possibly pretend to, the proof of it is in a hundred other persons, made of much stouter stuff, and each involved moreover in a hundred relations which matter to *them* concomitantly with that one. Cleopatra matters, beyond bounds, to Antony, but his colleagues, his antagonists, the state of Rome and the impending battle also prodigiously matter; Portia matters to Antonio, and to Shylock, and to the Prince of Morocco, to the fifty aspiring princes, but for these gentry there are other lively concerns; for Antonio, notably, there are Shylock and Bassanio and his lost ventures and the extremity of his predicament. This extremity indeed, by the same token, matters to Portia—though its doing so becomes of interest all by the fact that Portia matters to *us*. That she does so, at any rate, and that almost everything comes round to it again, supports my contention as to this fine example of the value recognised in the mere young thing. (I say ‘mere’ young thing because I guess that even Shakespeare, preoccupied mainly though he may have been with the passions of princes, would scarce have pretended to found the best of his appeal for her on her high social position.) It is an example exactly of the deep difficulty braved—the difficulty of making George Eliot’s ‘frail vessel,’ if not the all-in–all for our attention, at least the clearest of the call.

Now to see deep difficulty braved is at any time, for the really addicted artist, to feel almost even as a pang the beautiful incentive, and to feel it verily in such sort as to wish the danger intensified. The difficulty most worth tackling can only be for him, in these conditions, the greatest the case permits of. So I remember feeling here (in presence, always, that is, of the particular uncertainty of my ground), that there would be one way better than another—oh, ever so much better than any other!—of making it fight out its battle. The frail vessel, that charged with George Eliot’s ‘treasure,’ and thereby of such importance to those who curiously approach it, has likewise possibilities of importance to itself, possibilities which permit of treatment and in fact peculiarly require it from the moment they are considered at all. There is always the escape from any close account of the weak agent of such spells by using as a bridge for evasion, for retreat and flight, the view of her relation to those surrounding her. Make it predominantly a view of *their* relation and the trick is played: you give the general sense of her effect, and you give it, so far as the raising on it of a superstructure goes, with the maximum of ease. Well, I recall perfectly how little, in my now quite established connexion, the maximum of ease appealed to me, and how I seemed to get rid of it by an honest transposition of the weights in the two scales. ‘Place the centre of the subject in

the young woman's own consciousness,' I said to myself, 'and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to *that*—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself. Make her only interested enough, at the same time, in the things that are not herself, and this relation needn't fear to be too limited. Place meanwhile in the other scale the lighter weight (which is usually the one that tips the balance of interest): press least hard, in short, on the consciousness of your heroine's satellites, especially the male; make it an interest contributive only to the greater one. See, at all events, what can be done in this way. What better field could there be for a due ingenuity? The girl hovers, inextinguishable, as a charming creature, and the job will be to translate her into the highest terms of that formula, and as nearly as possible moreover into *all* of them. To depend upon her and her little concerns wholly to see you through will necessitate, remember, your really "doing" her.'

So far I reasoned, and it took nothing less than that technical rigour, I now easily see, to inspire me with the right confidence for erecting on such a plot of ground the neat and careful and proportioned pile of bricks that arches over it and that was thus to form, constructionally speaking, a literary monument. Such is the aspect that to-day 'The Portrait' wears for me: a structure reared with an 'architectural' competence, as Turgenieff would have said, that makes it, to the author's own sense, the most proportioned of his productions after 'The Ambassadors'—which was to follow it so many years later and which has, no doubt, a superior roundness. On one thing I was determined; that, though I should clearly have to pile brick upon brick for the creation of an interest, I would leave no pretext for saying that anything is out of line, scale or perspective. I would build large—in fine embossed vaults and painted arches, as who should say, and yet never let it appear that the chequered pavement, the ground under the reader's feet, fails to stretch at every point to the base of the walls. That precautionary spirit, on re-perusal of the book, is the old note that most touches me: it testifies so, for my own ear, to the anxiety of my provision for the reader's amusement. I felt, in view of the possible limitations of my subject, that no such provision could be excessive, and the development of the latter was simply the general form of that earnest quest. And I find indeed that this is the only account I can give myself of the evolution of the fable: it is all under the head thus named that I conceive the needful accretion as having taken place, the right complications as having started. It was naturally of the essence that the young woman should be herself complex; that was rudimentary—or was at any rate the light in which Isabel Archer had originally dawned. It went, however, but a certain way, and other lights, contending, conflicting lights, and of as many different colours, if possible, as the rockets, the Roman candles and Catherine-wheels of a 'pyrotechnic display,' would be employable to attest that she was. I had, no doubt, a groping instinct for the right complications, since I am quite unable to track the footsteps of those that constitute, as the case stands, the general situation exhibited. They are there, for what they are worth, and as numerous as might be; but my memory, I confess, is a blank as to how and whence they came.

I seem to myself to have waked up one morning in possession of them—of Ralph Touchett and his parents, of Madame Merle, of Gilbert Osmond and his daughter and his sister, of Lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood and Miss Stackpole, the definite array of contributions to Isabel Archer's history. I recognised them, I knew them, they were the numbered pieces of my puzzle, the concrete terms of my 'plot.' It was as if they had simply, by an impulse of their own, floated into my ken, and all in response to my primary question: 'Well, what will she *do*?' Their answer seemed to be that if I would trust them they would show me; on which, with an urgent appeal to them to make it at least as interesting as they could, I trusted them. They were like the group of attendants and entertainers who come down by train when people in the country give a party; they represented the contract for carrying the party on. That was an excellent relation with them—a possible one even with so broken a reed (from her slightness of cohesion) as Henrietta Stackpole. It is a familiar truth to the novelist, at the strenuous hour, that, as certain elements in any work are of the essence, so others are only of the form; that as this or that character, this or that disposition of the material, belongs to the subject directly, so to speak, so this or that other belongs to it but indirectly—belongs intimately to the treatment. This is a truth, however, of which he rarely gets the benefit—since it could be assured to him, really, but by criticism based upon perception, criticism which is too little of this world. He must not think of benefits, moreover, I freely recognise, for that way dishonour lies: he has, that is, but one to think of—the benefit, whatever it may be, involved in his having cast a spell upon the simpler, the very simplest, forms of attention. This is all he is entitled to; he is entitled to nothing, he is bound to admit, that can come to him, from the reader, as a result on the latter's part of any act of reflection or discrimination. He may *enjoy* this finer tribute—that is another affair, but on condition only of taking it as a gratuity 'thrown in,' a mere miraculous windfall, the fruit of a tree he may not pretend to have shaken. Against reflection, against discrimination, in his interest, all earth and air conspire; wherefore it is that, as I say, he must in many a case have schooled himself, from

the first, to work but for a 'living wage.' The living wage is the reader's grant of the least possible quantity of attention required for consciousness of a 'spell.' The occasional charming 'tip' is an act of his intelligence over and beyond this, a golden apple, for the writer's lap, straight from the wind-stirred tree. The artist may of course, in wanton moods, dream of some Paradise (for art) where the direct appeal to the intelligence might be legalised; for to such extravagances as these his yearning mind can scarce hope ever completely to close itself. The most he can do is to remember they *are* extravagances.

All of which is perhaps but a gracefully devious way of saying that Henrietta Stackpole was a good example, in 'The Portrait,' of the truth to which I just adverted—as good an example as I could name were it not that Maria Gostrey, in 'The Ambassadors,' then in the bosom of time, may be mentioned as a better. Each of these persons is but wheels to the coach; neither belongs to the body of that vehicle, or is for a moment accommodated with a seat inside. There the subject alone is ensconced, in the form of its 'hero and heroine,' and of the privileged high officials, say, who ride with the king and queen. There are reasons why one would have liked this to be felt, as in general one would like almost anything to be felt, in one's work, that one has one's self contributively felt. We have seen, however, how idle is that pretension, which I should be sorry to make too much of. Maria Gostrey and Miss Stackpole then are cases, each, of the light *ficelle*,* not of the true agent; they may run beside the coach 'for all they are worth,' they may cling to it till they are out of breath (as poor Miss Stackpole all so visibly does), but neither, all the while, so much as gets her foot on the step, neither ceases for a moment to tread the dusty road. Put it even that they are like the fishwives who helped to bring back to Paris from Versailles, on that most ominous day of the first half of the French Revolution, the carriage of the royal family. The only thing is that I may well be asked, I acknowledge, why then, in the present fiction, I have suffered Henrietta (of whom we have indubitably too much) so officiously, so strangely, so almost inexplicably, to pervade. I will presently say what I can for that anomaly and in the most conciliatory fashion.

A point I wish still more to make is that if my relation of confidence with the actors in my drama who *were*, unlike Miss Stackpole, true agents, was an excellent one to have arrived at, there still remained my relation with the reader, which was another affair altogether and as to which I felt no one to be trusted but myself. That solicitude was to be accordingly expressed in the artful patience with which, as I have said, I piled brick upon brick. The bricks, for the whole countingover—putting for bricks little touches and inventions and enhancements by the way—affect me in truth as wellnigh innumerable and as ever so scrupulously fitted together and packed in. It is an effect of detail, of the minutest; though, if one were in this connection to say all, one would express the hope that the general, the ampler air of the modest monument still survives. I do at least seem to catch the key to a part of this abundance of small anxious, ingenious illustration as I recollect putting my finger, in my young woman's interest, on the most obvious of her predicates. 'What will she "do"? Why, the first thing she'll do will be to come to Europe; which in fact will form, and all inevitably, no small part of her principal adventure. Coming to Europe is even for the "frail vessels," in this wonderful age, a mild adventure; but what is truer than that on one side—the side of their independence of flood and field, of the moving accident, of battle and murder and sudden death—her adventures are to be mild? Without her sense of them, her sense *for* them, as one may say, they are next to nothing at all; but isn't the beauty and the difficulty just in showing their mystic conversion by that sense, conversion into the stuff of drama or, even more delightful word still, of "story"?' It was all as clear, my contention, as a silver bell. Two very good instances, I think, of this effect of conversion, two cases of the rare chemistry, are the pages in which Isabel, coming into the drawing-room at Gardencourt, coming in from a wet walk or whatever, that rainy afternoon, finds Madame Merle in possession of the place, Madame Merle seated, all absorbed but all serene, at the piano, and deeply recognises, in the striking of such an hour, in the presence there, among the gathering shades, of this personage, of whom a moment before she had never so much as heard, a turning-point in her life. It is dreadful to have too much, for any artistic demonstration, to dot one's i's and insist on one's intentions, and I am not eager to do it now; but the question here was that of producing the maximum of intensity with the minimum of strain.

The interest was to be raised to its pitch and yet the elements to be kept in their key; so that, should the whole thing duly impress, I might show what an 'exciting' inward life may do for the person leading it even while it remains perfectly normal. And I cannot think of a more consistent application of that ideal unless it be in the long statement, just beyond the middle of the book, of my young woman's extraordinary meditative vigil on the occasion that was to become for her such a landmark. Reduced to its essence, it is but the vigil of searching criticism; but it throws the action further forward than twenty 'incidents' might have done. It was designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture. She sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night, under the spell of recognitions on which she finds the last sharpness suddenly wait. It is a representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*, and an

attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as ‘interesting’ as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate. It represents, for that matter, one of the identifications dear to the novelist, and even indispensable to him; but it all goes on without her being approached by another person and without her leaving her chair. It is obviously the best thing in the book, but it is only a supreme illustration of the general plan. As to Henrietta, my apology for whom I just left incomplete, she exemplifies, I fear, in her superabundance, not an element of my plan, but only an excess of my zeal. So early was to begin my tendency to *overtreat*, rather than undertreat (when there was choice or danger) my subject. (Many members of my craft, I gather, are far from agreeing with me, but I have always held overtreating the minor disservice.) ‘Treating’ that of ‘The Portrait’ amounted to never forgetting, by any lapse, that the thing was under a special obligation to be amusing. There was the danger of the noted ‘thinness’—which was to be averted, tooth and nail, by cultivation of the lively. That is at least how I see it to-day. Henrietta must have been at that time a part of my wonderful notion of the lively. And then there was another matter. I had, within the few preceding years, come to live in London, and the ‘international’ light lay, in those days, to my sense, thick and rich upon the scene. It was the light in which so much of the picture hung. But that *is* another matter. There is really too much to say.

HENRY JAMES

I

UNDER certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do,—the situation is in itself delightful. Those that I have in mind in beginning to unfold this simple history offered an admirable setting to an innocent pastime. The implements of the little feast had been disposed upon the lawn of an old English country-house, in what I should call the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon. Part of the afternoon had waned, but much of it was left, and what was left was of the finest and rarest quality. Real dusk would not arrive for many hours; but the flood of summer light had begun to ebb, the air had grown mellow, the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf. They lengthened slowly, however, and the scene expressed that sense of leisure still to come which is perhaps the chief source of one's enjoyment of such a scene at such an hour. From five o'clock to eight is on certain occasions a little eternity; but on such an occasion as this the interval could be only an eternity of pleasure. The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly, and they were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of the ceremony I have mentioned. The shadows on the perfect lawn were straight and angular; they were the shadows of an old man sitting in a deep wicker-chair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and of two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him. The old man had his cup in his hand; it was an unusually large cup, of a different pattern from the rest of the set and painted in brilliant colours. He disposed of its contents with much circumspection, holding it for a long time close to his chin, with his face turned to the house. His companions had either finished their tea or were indifferent to their privilege; they smoked cigarettes as they continued to stroll. One of them, from time to time, as he passed, looked with a certain attention at the elder man, who, unconscious of observation, rested his eyes upon the rich red front of his dwelling. The house that rose beyond the lawn was a structure to repay such consideration and was the most characteristic object in the peculiarly English picture I have attempted to sketch.

It stood upon a low hill, above the river—the river being the Thames at some forty miles from London. A long gabled front of red brick, with the complexion of which time and the weather had played all sorts of pictorial tricks, only, however, to improve and refine it, presented to the lawn its patches of ivy, its clustered chimneys, its windows smothered in creepers. The house had a name and a history; the old gentleman taking his tea would have been delighted to tell you these things: how it had been built under Edward the Sixth, had offered a night's hospitality to the great Elizabeth (whose august person had extended itself upon a huge, magnificent, and terribly angular bed which still formed the principal honour of the sleeping apartments), had been a good deal bruised and defaced in Cromwell's wars, and then, under the Restoration, repaired and much enlarged; and how, finally, after having been remodelled and disfigured in the eighteenth century, it had passed into the careful keeping of a shrewd American banker, who had bought it originally because (owing to circumstances too complicated to set forth) it was offered at a great bargain: bought it with much grumbling at its ugliness, its antiquity, its incommodity, and who now, at the end of twenty years, had become conscious of a real aesthetic passion for it, so that he knew all its points and would tell you just where to stand to see them in combination and just the hour when the shadows of its various protuberances—which fell so softly upon the warm, weary brickwork—were of the right measure. Besides this, as I have said, he could have counted off most of the successive owners and occupants, several of whom were known to general fame; doing so, however, with an undemonstrative conviction that the latest phase of its destiny was not the least honourable. The front of the house overlooking that portion of the lawn with which we are concerned was not the entrance-front; this was in quite another quarter. Privacy here reigned supreme, and the wide carpet of turf that covered the level hill-top seemed but the extension of a luxurious interior. The great still oaks and beeches flung down a shade as dense as that of velvet curtains; and the place was furnished, like a room, with cushioned seats, with rich-coloured rugs, with the books and papers that lay upon the grass. The river was at some distance; where the ground began to slope, the lawn, properly speaking, ceased. But it was none the less a charming walk down to the water.

The old gentleman at the tea-table, who had come from America thirty years before, had brought with him, at the top of his baggage, his American physiognomy; and he had not only brought it with him, but he had kept it in the best order, so that, if necessary, he might have taken it back to his own country with

perfect confidence. At present, obviously, nevertheless, he was not likely to displace himself; his journeys were over, and he was taking the rest that precedes the great rest. He had a narrow, clean-shaven face, with features evenly distributed and an expression of placid acuteness. It was evidently a face in which the range of representation was not large, so that the air of contented shrewdness was all the more of a merit. It seemed to tell that he had been successful in life, yet it seemed to tell also that his success had not been exclusive and invidious, but had had much of the inoffensiveness of failure. He had certainly had a great experience of men, but there was an almost rustic simplicity in the faint smile that played upon his lean, spacious cheek and lighted up his humorous eye as he at last slowly and carefully deposited his big tea-cup upon the table. He was neatly dressed, in well-brushed black; but a shawl was folded upon his knees, and his feet were encased in thick, embroidered slippers. A beautiful collie dog lay upon the grass near his chair, watching the master's face almost as tenderly as the master took in the still more magisterial physiognomy* of the house; and a little bristling, bustling terrier bestowed a desultory attendance upon the other gentlemen.

One of these was a remarkably well-made man of five-and-thirty, with a face as English as that of the old gentleman I have just sketched was something else; a noticeably handsome face, freshcoloured, fair and frank, with firm, straight features, a lively grey eye and the rich adornment of a chestnut beard. This person had a certain fortunate, brilliant exceptional look—the air of a happy temperament fertilised by a high civilisation—which would have made almost any observer envy him at a venture. He was booted and spurred, as if he had dismounted from a long ride; he wore a white hat, which looked too large for him; he held his two hands behind him, and in one of them—a large, white, well-shaped fist—was crumpled a pair of soiled dog-skin gloves.

His companion, measuring the length of the lawn beside him, was a person of quite a different pattern, who, although he might have excited grave curiosity, would not, like the other, have provoked you to wish yourself, almost blindly, in his place. Tall, lean, loosely and feebly put together, he had an ugly, sickly, witty, charming face, furnished, but by no means decorated, with a straggling moustache and whisker. He looked clever and ill—a combination by no means felicitous; and he wore a brown velvet jacket. He carried his hands in his pockets, and there was something in the way he did it that showed the habit was inveterate. His gait had a shambling, wandering quality; he was not very firm on his legs. As I have said, whenever he passed the old man in the chair he rested his eyes upon him; and at this moment, with their faces brought into relation, you would easily have seen they were father and son. The father caught his son's eye at last and gave him a mild, responsive smile.

'I'm getting on very well,' he said.

'Have you drunk your tea?' asked the son.

'Yes, and enjoyed it.'

'Shall I give you some more?'

The old man considered, placidly. 'Well, I guess I'll wait and see.' He had, in speaking, the American tone.

'Are you cold?' the son enquired.

The father slowly rubbed his legs. 'Well, I don't know. I can't tell till I feel.'

'Perhaps some one might feel for you,' said the younger man, laughing.

'Oh, I hope some one will always feel for me! Don't you feel for me, Lord Warburton?'

'Oh yes, immensely,' said the gentleman addressed as Lord Warburton, promptly. 'I'm bound to say you look wonderfully comfortable.'

'Well, I suppose I am, in most respects.' And the old man looked down at his green shawl and smoothed it over his knees. 'The fact is I've been comfortable so many years that I suppose I've got so used to it I don't know it.'

'Yes, that's the bore of comfort,' said Lord Warburton. 'We only know when we're uncomfortable.'

'It strikes me we're rather particular,' his companion remarked.

'Oh yes, there's no doubt we're particular,' Lord Warburton murmured. And then the three men remained silent a while; the two younger ones standing looking down at the other, who presently asked for more tea. 'I should think you would be very unhappy with that shawl,' Lord Warburton resumed while his companion filled the old man's cup again.

'Oh no, he must have the shawl!' cried the gentleman in the velvet coat. 'Don't put such ideas as that into his head.'

'It belongs to my wife,' said the old man simply.

‘Oh, if it’s for sentimental reasons——’ And Lord Warburton made a gesture of apology.

‘I suppose I must give it to her when she comes,’ the old man went on.

‘You’ll please to do nothing of the kind. You’ll keep it to cover your poor old legs.’

‘Well, you mustn’t abuse my legs,’ said the old man. ‘I guess they are as good as yours.’

‘Oh, you’re perfectly free to abuse mine,’ his son replied, giving him his tea.

‘Well, we’re two lame ducks; I don’t think there’s much difference.’

‘I’m much obliged to you for calling me a duck. How’s your tea?’

‘Well, it’s rather hot.’

‘That’s intended to be a merit.’

‘Ah, there’s a great deal of merit,’ murmured the old man, kindly. ‘He’s a very good nurse, Lord Warburton.’

‘Isn’t he a bit clumsy?’ asked his lordship.

‘Oh no, he’s not clumsy—considering that he’s an invalid himself. He’s a very good nurse—for a sick-nurse. I call him my sick-nurse because he’s sick himself.’

‘Oh, come, daddy!’ the ugly young man exclaimed.

‘Well, you are; I wish you weren’t. But I suppose you can’t help it.’

‘I might try: that’s an idea,’ said the young man.

‘Were you ever sick, Lord Warburton?’ his father asked.

Lord Warburton considered a moment. ‘Yes, sir, once, in the Persian Gulf.’

‘He’s making light of you, daddy,’ said the other young man. ‘That’s a sort of joke.’

‘Well, there seem to be so many sorts now,’ daddy replied, serenely. ‘You don’t look as if you had been sick, any way, Lord Warburton.’

‘He’s sick of life; he was just telling me so; going on fearfully about it,’ said Lord Warburton’s friend.

‘Is that true, sir?’ asked the old man gravely.

‘If it is, your son gave me no consolation. He’s a wretched fellow to talk to—a regular cynic. He doesn’t seem to believe in anything.’

‘That’s another sort of joke,’ said the person accused of cynicism.

‘It’s because his health is so poor,’ his father explained to Lord Warburton. ‘It affects his mind and colours his way of looking at things; he seems to feel as if he had never had a chance. But it’s almost entirely theoretical, you know; it doesn’t seem to affect his spirits. I’ve hardly ever seen him when he wasn’t cheerful—about as he is at present. He often cheers me up.’

The young man so described looked at Lord Warburton and laughed. ‘Is it a glowing eulogy or an accusation of levity? Should you like me to carry out my theories, daddy?’

‘By Jove, we should see some queer things!’ cried Lord Warburton.

‘I hope you haven’t taken up that sort of tone,’ said the old man.

‘Warburton’s tone is worse than mine; he pretends to be bored. I’m not in the least bored; I find life only too interesting.’

‘Ah, *too* interesting; you shouldn’t allow it to be that, you know!’

‘I’m never bored when I come here,’ said Lord Warburton. ‘One gets such uncommonly good talk.’

‘Is that another sort of joke?’ asked the old man. ‘You’ve no excuse for being bored anywhere. When I was your age I had never heard of such a thing.’

‘You must have developed very late.’

‘No, I developed very quick; that was just the reason. When I was twenty years old I was very highly developed indeed. I was working tooth and nail. You wouldn’t be bored if you had something to do; but all you young men are too idle. You think too much of your pleasure. You’re too fastidious, and too indolent, and too rich.’

‘Oh, I say,’ cried Lord Warburton, ‘you’re hardly the person to accuse a fellow-creature of being too rich!’

‘Do you mean because I’m a banker?’ asked the old man.

‘Because of that, if you like; and because you have—haven’t you?—such unlimited means.’

‘He isn’t very rich,’ the other young man mercifully pleaded. ‘He has given away an immense deal of money.’

‘Well, I suppose it was his own,’ said Lord Warburton; ‘and in that case could there be a better proof of wealth? Let not a public benefactor talk of one’s being too fond of pleasure.’

‘Daddy’s very fond of pleasure—of other people’s.’

The old man shook his head. ‘I don’t pretend to have contributed anything to the amusement of my contemporaries.’

‘My dear father, you’re too modest!’

‘That’s a kind of joke, sir,’ said Lord Warburton.

‘You young men have too many jokes. When there are no jokes you’ve nothing left.’

‘Fortunately there are always more jokes,’ the ugly young man remarked.

‘I don’t believe it—I believe things are getting more serious. You young men will find that out.’

‘The increasing seriousness of things, then—that’s the great opportunity of jokes.’

‘They’ll have to be grim jokes,’ said the old man. ‘I’m convinced there will be great changes; and not all for the better.’

‘I quite agree with you, sir,’ Lord Warburton declared. ‘I’m very sure there will be great changes, and that all sorts of queer things will happen. That’s why I find so much difficulty in applying your advice; you know you told me the other day that I ought to “take hold” of something. One hesitates to take hold of a thing that may the next moment be knocked sky-high.’

‘You ought to take hold of a pretty woman,’ said his companion. ‘He’s trying hard to fall in love,’ he added, by way of explanation, to his father.

‘The pretty women themselves may be sent flying!’ Lord Warburton exclaimed.

‘No, no, they’ll be firm,’ the old man rejoined; ‘they’ll not be affected by the social and political changes I just referred to.’

‘You mean they won’t be abolished? Very well, then, I’ll lay hands on one as soon as possible and tie her round my neck as a lifepreserver.’

‘The ladies will save us,’ said the old man; ‘that is the best of them will—for I make a difference between them. Make up to a good one and marry her, and your life will become much more interesting.’

A momentary silence marked perhaps on the part of his auditors a sense of the magnanimity of this speech, for it was a secret neither for his son nor for his visitor that his own experiment in matrimony had not been a happy one. As he said, however, he made a difference; and these words may have been intended as a confession of personal error; though of course it was not in place for either of his companions to remark that apparently the lady of his choice had not been one of the best.

‘If I marry an interesting woman I shall be interested: is that what you say?’ Lord Warburton asked. ‘I’m not at all keen about marrying—your son misrepresented me; but there’s no knowing what an interesting woman might do with me.’

‘I should like to see your idea of an interesting woman,’ said his friend.

‘My dear fellow, you can’t see ideas—especially such highly ethereal ones as mine. If I could only see it myself—that would be a great step in advance.’

‘Well, you may fall in love with whomsoever you please; but you mustn’t fall in love with my niece,’ said the old man.

His son broke into a laugh. ‘He’ll think you mean that as a provocation! My dear father, you’ve lived with the English for thirty years, and you’ve picked up a good many of the things they say. But you’ve never learned the things they don’t say!’

‘I say what I please,’ the old man returned with all his serenity.

‘I haven’t the honour of knowing your niece,’ Lord Warburton said. ‘I think it’s the first time I’ve heard of her.’

‘She’s a niece of my wife’s; Mrs Touchett brings her to England.’

Then young Mr Touchett explained. ‘My mother, you know, has been spending the winter in America, and we’re expecting her back. She writes that she has discovered a niece and that she has invited her to come out with her.’

‘I see—very kind of her,’ said Lord Warburton. ‘Is the young lady interesting?’

‘We hardly know more about her than you; my mother has not gone into details. She chiefly communicates with us by means of telegrams, and her telegrams are rather inscrutable. They say women don’t know how to write them, but my mother has thoroughly mastered the art of condensation. “Tired America, hot weather awful, return England with niece, first steamer decent cabin.” That’s the sort of

message we get from her—that was the last that came. But there had been another before, which I think contained the first mention of the niece. “Changed hotel, very bad, impudent clerk, address here. Taken sister’s girl, died last year, go to Europe, two sisters, quite independent.” Over that my father and I have scarcely stopped puzzling; it seems to admit of so many interpretations.’

‘There’s one thing very clear in it,’ said the old man; ‘she has given the hotel-clerk a dressing.’

‘I’m not sure even of that, since he has driven her from the field. We thought at first that the sister mentioned might be the sister of the clerk; but the subsequent mention of a niece seems to prove that the allusion is to one of my aunts. Then there was a question as to whose the two other sisters were; they are probably two of my late aunt’s daughters. But who’s “quite independent,” and in what sense is the term used?—that point’s not yet settled. Does the expression apply more particularly to the young lady my mother has adopted, or does it characterise her sisters equally?—and is it used in a moral or in a financial sense? Does it mean that they’ve been left well off, or that they wish to be under no obligations? or does it simply mean that they’re fond of their own way?’

‘Whatever else it means, it’s pretty sure to mean that,’ Mr Touchett remarked.

‘You’ll see for yourself,’ said Lord Warburton. ‘When does Mrs Touchett arrive?’

‘We’re quite in the dark; as soon as she can find a decent cabin. She may be waiting for it yet; on the other hand she may already have disembarked in England.’

‘In that case she would probably have telegraphed to you.’

‘She never telegraphs when you would expect it—only when you don’t,’ said the old man. ‘She likes to drop in on me suddenly; she thinks she’ll find me doing something wrong. She has never done so yet, but she’s not discouraged.’

‘It’s her share in the family trait, the independence she speaks of.’ Her son’s appreciation of the matter was more favourable. ‘Whatever the high spirit of those young ladies may be, her own is a match for it. She likes to do everything for herself and has no belief in any one’s power to help her. She thinks me of no more use than a postage-stamp without gum, and she would never forgive me if I should presume to go to Liverpool to meet her.’

‘Will you at least let me know when your cousin arrives?’ Lord Warburton asked.

‘Only on the condition I’ve mentioned—that you don’t fall in love with her!’ Mr Touchett replied.

‘That strikes me as hard. Don’t you think me good enough?’

‘I think you too good—because I shouldn’t like her to marry you. She hasn’t come here to look for a husband, I hope; so many young ladies are doing that, as if there were no good ones at home. Then she’s probably engaged; American girls* are usually engaged, I believe. Moreover I’m not sure, after all, that you’d be a remarkable husband.’

‘Very likely she’s engaged; I’ve known a good many American girls, and they always were; but I could never see that it made any difference, upon my word! As for my being a good husband,’ Mr Touchett’s visitor pursued, ‘I’m not sure of that either. One can but try!’

‘Try as much as you please, but don’t try on my niece,’ smiled the old man, whose opposition to the idea was broadly humorous.

‘Ah, well,’ said Lord Warburton with a humour broader still, ‘perhaps, after all, she’s not worth trying on!’

II

WHILE this exchange of pleasantries took place between the two Ralph Touchett wandered away a little, with his usual slouching gait, his hands in his pockets and his little rowdyish terrier at his heels. His face was turned toward the house, but his eyes were bent musingly on the lawn; so that he had been an object of observation to a person who had just made her appearance in the ample doorway for some moments before he perceived her. His attention was called to her by the conduct of his dog, who had suddenly darted forward with a little volley of shrill barks, in which the note of welcome, however, was more sensible than that of defiance. The person in question was a young lady, who seemed immediately to interpret the greeting of the small beast. He advanced with great rapidity and stood at her feet, looking up and barking hard; whereupon, without hesitation, she stooped and caught him in her hands, holding him face to face while he continued his quick chatter. His master now had had time to follow and to see that Bunchie's new friend was a tall girl in a black dress, who at first sight looked pretty. She was bare-headed, as if she were staying in the house—a fact which conveyed perplexity to the son of its master, conscious of that immunity from visitors which had for some time been rendered necessary by the latter's ill-health. Meantime the two other gentlemen had also taken note of the new-comer.

'Dear me, who's that strange woman?' Mr Touchett had asked.

'Perhaps it's Mrs Touchett's niece—the independent young lady,' Lord Warburton suggested. 'I think she must be, from the way she handles the dog.'

The collie, too, had now allowed his attention to be diverted, and he trotted toward the young lady in the doorway, slowly setting his tail in motion as he went.

'But where's my wife then?' murmured the old man.

'I suppose the young lady has left her somewhere: that's a part of the independence.'

The girl spoke to Ralph, smiling, while she still held up the terrier. 'Is this your little dog, sir?'

'He was mine a moment ago; but you've suddenly acquired a remarkable air of property in him.'

'Couldn't we share him?' asked the girl. 'He's such a perfect little darling.'

Ralph looked at her a moment; she was unexpectedly pretty. 'You may have him altogether,' he then replied.

The young lady seemed to have a great deal of confidence, both in herself and in others; but this abrupt generosity made her blush. 'I ought to tell you that I'm probably your cousin,' she brought out, putting down the dog. 'And here's another!' she added quickly, as the collie came up.

'Probably?' the young man exclaimed, laughing. 'I supposed it was quite settled! Have you arrived with my mother?'

'Yes, half an hour ago.'

'And has she deposited you and departed again?'

'No, she went straight to her room, and she told me that, if I should see you, I was to say to you that you must come to her there at a quarter to seven.'

The young man looked at his watch. 'Thank you very much; I shall be punctual.' And then he looked at his cousin. 'You're very welcome here. I'm delighted to see you.'

She was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception—at her companion, at the two dogs, at the two gentlemen under the trees, at the beautiful scene that surrounded her. 'I've never seen anything so lovely as this place. I've been all over the house; it's too enchanting.'

'I'm sorry you should have been here so long without our knowing it.'

'Your mother told me that in England people arrived very quietly; so I thought it was all right. Is one of those gentlemen your father?'

'Yes, the elder one—the one sitting down,' said Ralph.

The girl gave a laugh. 'I don't suppose it's the other. Who's the other?'

'He's a friend of ours—Lord Warburton.'

'Oh, I hoped there would be a lord; it's just like a novel!' And then, 'Oh you adorable creature!' she suddenly cried, stooping down and picking up the small dog again.

She remained standing where they had met, making no offer to advance or to speak to Mr Touchett,

and while she lingered so near the threshold, slim and charming, her interlocutor wondered if she expected the old man to come and pay her his respects. American girls were used to a great deal of deference, and it had been intimated that this one had a high spirit. Indeed Ralph could see that in her face.

'Won't you come and make acquaintance with my father?' he nevertheless ventured to ask. 'He's old and infirm—he doesn't leave his chair.'

'Ah, poor man, I'm very sorry!' the girl exclaimed, immediately moving forward. 'I got the impression from your mother that he was rather—rather intensely active.'

Ralph Touchett was silent a moment. 'She hasn't seen him for a year.'

'Well, he has a lovely place to sit. Come along, little hound.'

'It's a dear old place,' said the young man, looking sidewise at his neighbour.

'What's his name?' she asked, her attention having again reverted to the terrier.

'My father's name?'

'Yes,' said the young lady with amusement; 'but don't tell him I asked you.'

They had come by this time to where old Mr Touchett was sitting, and he slowly got up from his chair to introduce himself.

'My mother has arrived,' said Ralph, 'and this is Miss Archer.'

The old man placed his two hands on her shoulders, looked at her a moment with extreme benevolence and then gallantly kissed her. 'It's a great pleasure to me to see you here; but I wish you had given us a chance to receive you.'

'Oh, we were received,' said the girl. 'There were about a dozen servants in the hall. And there was an old woman curtseying at the gate.'

'We can do better than that—if we have notice!' And the old man stood there smiling, rubbing his hands and slowly shaking his head at her. 'But Mrs Touchett doesn't like receptions.'

'She went straight to her room.'

'Yes—and locked herself in. She always does that. Well, I suppose I shall see her next week.' And Mrs Touchett's husband slowly resumed his former posture.

'Before that,' said Miss Archer. 'She's coming down to dinner—at eight o'clock. Don't you forget a quarter to seven,' she added, turning with a smile to Ralph.

'What's to happen at a quarter to seven?'

'I'm to see my mother,' said Ralph.

'Ah, happy boy!' the old man commented. 'You must sit down—you must have some tea,' he observed to his wife's niece.

'They gave me some tea in my room the moment I got there,' this young lady answered. 'I'm sorry you're out of health,' she added, resting her eyes upon her venerable host.

'Oh, I'm an old man, my dear; it's time for me to be old. But I shall be the better for having you here.'

She had been looking all round her again—at the lawn, the great trees, the reedy, silvery Thames, the beautiful old house; and while engaged in this survey she had made room in it for her companions; a comprehensiveness of observation easily conceivable on the part of a young woman who was evidently both intelligent and excited. She had seated herself and had put away the little dog; her white hands, in her lap, were folded upon her black dress; her head was erect, her eye lighted, her flexible figure turned itself easily this way and that, in sympathy with the alertness with which she evidently caught impressions. Her impressions were numerous, and they were all reflected in a clear, still smile. 'I've never seen anything so beautiful as this.'

'It's looking very well,' said Mr Touchett. 'I know the way it strikes you. I've been through all that. But you're very beautiful yourself,' he added with a politeness by no means crudely jocular and with the happy consciousness that his advanced age gave him the privilege of saying such things—even to young persons who might possibly take alarm at them.

What degree of alarm this young person took need not be exactly measured; she instantly rose, however, with a blush which was not a refutation. 'Oh yes, of course I'm lovely!' she returned with a quick laugh. 'How old is your house? Is it Elizabethan?'

'It's early Tudor,' said Ralph Touchett.

She turned toward him, watching his face. 'Early Tudor? How very delightful! And I suppose there are a great many others.'

‘There are many much better ones.’

‘Don’t say that, my son!’ the old man protested. ‘There’s nothing better than this.’

‘I’ve got a very good one; I think in some respects it’s rather better,’ said Lord Warburton, who as yet had not spoken, but who had kept an attentive eye upon Miss Archer. He slightly inclined himself, smiling; he had an excellent manner with women. The girl appreciated it in an instant; she had not forgotten that this was Lord Warburton. ‘I should like very much to show it to you,’ he added.

‘Don’t believe him,’ cried the old man; ‘don’t look at it! It’s a wretched old barrack—not to be compared with this.’

‘I don’t know—I can’t judge,’ said the girl, smiling at Lord Warburton.

In this discussion Ralph Touchett took no interest whatever; he stood with his hands in his pockets, looking greatly as if he should like to renew his conversation with his new-found cousin. ‘Are you very fond of dogs?’ he enquired by way of beginning. He seemed to recognise that it was an awkward beginning for a clever man.

‘Very fond of them indeed.’

‘You must keep the terrier, you know,’ he went on, still awkwardly.

‘I’ll keep him while I’m here, with pleasure.’

‘That will be for a long time, I hope.’

‘You’re very kind. I hardly know. My aunt must settle that.’

‘I’ll settle it with her—at a quarter to seven.’ And Ralph looked at his watch again.

‘I’m glad to be here at all,’ said the girl.

‘I don’t believe you allow things to be settled for you.’

‘Oh yes; if they’re settled as I like them.’

‘I shall settle this as I like it,’ said Ralph. ‘It’s most unaccountable that we should never have known you.’

‘I was there—you had only to come and see me.’

‘There? Where do you mean?’

‘In the United States: in New York and Albany and other American places.’

‘I’ve been there—all over, but I never saw you. I can’t make it out.’

Miss Archer just hesitated. ‘It was because there had been some disagreement between your mother and my father, after my mother’s death, which took place when I was a child. In consequence of it we never expected to see you.’

‘Ah, but I don’t embrace all my mother’s quarrels—heaven forbid!’ the young man cried. ‘You’ve lately lost your father?’ he went on more gravely.

‘Yes; more than a year ago. After that my aunt was very kind to me; she came to see me and proposed that I should come with her to Europe.’

‘I see,’ said Ralph. ‘She has adopted you.’

‘Adopted me?’ The girl stared, and her blush came back to her, together with a momentary look of pain which gave her interlocutor some alarm. He had underestimated the effect of his words. Lord Warburton, who appeared constantly desirous of a nearer view of Miss Archer, strolled toward the two cousins at the moment, and as he did so she rested her wider eyes on him. ‘Oh no; she has not adopted me. I’m not a candidate for adoption.’

‘I beg a thousand pardons,’ Ralph murmured. ‘I meant—I meant—’ He hardly knew what he meant.

‘You meant she has taken me up. Yes; she likes to take people up. She has been very kind to me; but,’ she added with a certain visible eagerness of desire to be explicit, ‘I’m very fond of my liberty.’

‘Are you talking about Mrs Touchett?’ the old man called out from his chair. ‘Come here, my dear, and tell me about her. I’m always thankful for information.’

The girl hesitated again, smiling. ‘She’s really very benevolent,’ she answered; after which she went over to her uncle, whose mirth was excited by her words.

Lord Warburton was left standing with Ralph Touchett, to whom in a moment he said: ‘You wished a while ago to see my idea of an interesting woman. There it is!’

III

MRS TOUCHETT was certainly a person of many oddities, of which her behaviour on returning to her husband's house after many months was a noticeable specimen. She had her own way of doing all that she did, and this is the simplest description of a character which, although by no means without liberal motions, rarely succeeded in giving an impression of suavity. Mrs Touchett might do a great deal of good, but she never pleased. This way of her own, of which she was so fond, was not intrinsically offensive—it was just unmistakeably distinguished from the ways of others. The edges of her conduct were so very clear-cut that for susceptible persons it sometimes had a knife-like effect. That hard fineness came out in her deportment during the first hours of her return from America, under circumstances in which it might have seemed that her first act would have been to exchange greetings with her husband and son. Mrs Touchett, for reasons which she deemed excellent, always retired on such occasions into impenetrable seclusion, postponing the more sentimental ceremony until she had repaired the disorder of dress with a completeness which had the less reason to be of high importance as neither beauty nor vanity were concerned in it. She was a plain-faced old woman, without graces and without any great elegance, but with an extreme respect for her own motives. She was usually prepared to explain these—when the explanation was asked as a favour; and in such a case they proved totally different from those that had been attributed to her. She was virtually separated from her husband, but she appeared to perceive nothing irregular in the situation. It had become clear, at an early stage of their community, that they should never desire the same thing at the same moment, and this appearance had prompted her to rescue disagreement from the vulgar realm of accident. She did what she could to erect it into a law—a much more edifying aspect of it—by going to live in Florence, where she bought a house and established herself; and by leaving her husband to take care of the English branch of his bank. This arrangement greatly pleased her; it was so felicitously definite. It struck her husband in the same light, in a foggy square in London, where it was at times the most definite fact he discerned; but he would have preferred that such unnatural things should have a greater vagueness. To agree to disagree had cost him an effort; he was ready to agree to almost anything but that, and saw no reason why either assent or dissent should be so terribly consistent. Mrs Touchett indulged in no regrets nor speculations, and usually came once a year to spend a month with her husband, a period during which she apparently took pains to convince him that she had adopted the right system. She was not fond of the English style of life, and had three or four reasons for it to which she currently alluded; they bore upon minor points of that ancient order, but for Mrs Touchett they amply justified non-residence. She detested bread-sauce, which, as she said, looked like a poultice and tasted like soap; she objected to the consumption of beer by her maid-servants; and she affirmed that the British laundress (Mrs Touchett was very particular about the appearance of her linen) was not a mistress of her art. At fixed intervals she paid a visit to her own country; but this last had been longer than any of its predecessors.

She had taken up her niece—there was little doubt of that. One wet afternoon, some four months earlier than the occurrence lately narrated, this young lady had been seated alone with a book. To say she was so occupied is to say that her solitude did not press upon her; for her love of knowledge had a fertilising quality and her imagination was strong. There was at this time, however, a want of fresh taste in her situation which the arrival of an unexpected visitor did much to correct. The visitor had not been announced; the girl heard her at last walking about the adjoining room. It was in an old house at Albany, a large, square, double house, with a notice of sale in the windows of one of the lower apartments. There were two entrances, one of which had long been out of use but had never been removed. They were exactly alike—large white doors, with an arched frame and wide side-lights, perched upon little 'stoops' of red stone, which descended sidewise to the brick pavement of the street. The two houses together formed a single dwelling, the party-wall having been removed and the rooms placed in communication. These rooms, above-stairs, were extremely numerous, and were painted all over exactly alike, in a yellowish white which had grown sallow with time. On the third floor there was a sort of arched passage, connecting the two sides of the house, which Isabel and her sisters used in their childhood to call the tunnel and which, though it was short and well-lighted, always seemed to the girl to be strange and lonely, especially on winter afternoons. She had been in the house, at different periods, as a child; in those days her grandmother lived there. Then there had been an absence of ten years, followed by a return to Albany before her father's death. Her grandmother, old Mrs Archer, had exercised, chiefly

within the limits of the family, a large hospitality in the early period, and the little girls often spent weeks under her roof—weeks of which Isabel had the happiest memory. The manner of life was different from that of her own home—larger, more plentiful, practically more festal; the discipline of the nursery was delightfully vague and the opportunity of listening to the conversation of one's elders (which with Isabel was a highly-valued pleasure) almost unbounded. There was a constant coming and going; her grandmother's sons and daughters and their children appeared to be in the enjoyment of standing invitations to arrive and remain, so that the house offered to a certain extent the appearance of a bustling provincial inn kept by a gentle old landlady who sighed a great deal and never presented a bill. Isabel of course knew nothing about bills; but even as a child she thought her grandmother's home romantic.* There was a covered piazza behind it, furnished with a swing which was a source of tremulous interest; and beyond this was a long garden, sloping down to the stable and containing peach-trees of barely credible familiarity. Isabel had stayed with her grandmother at various seasons, but somehow all her visits had a flavour of peaches. On the other side, across the street, was an old house that was called the Dutch House—a peculiar structure dating from the earliest colonial time, composed of bricks that had been painted yellow, crowned with a gable that was pointed out to strangers, defended by a rickety wooden paling and standing sidewise to the street. It was occupied by a primary school for children of both sexes, kept or rather let go, by a demonstrative lady of whom Isabel's chief recollection was that her hair was fastened with strange bedroomy combs at the temples and that she was the widow of some one of consequence. The little girl had been offered the opportunity of laying a foundation of knowledge in this establishment; but having spent a single day in it, she had protested against its laws and had been allowed to stay at home, where, in the September days, when the windows of the Dutch House were open, she used to hear the hum of childish voices repeating the multiplication-table—an incident in which the elation of liberty and the pain of exclusion were indistinguishably mingled. The foundation of her knowledge was really laid in the idleness of her grandmother's house, where, as most of the other inmates were not reading people, she had uncontrolled use of a library full of books with frontispieces, which she used to climb upon a chair to take down. When she had found one to her taste—she was guided in the selection chiefly by the frontispiece—she carried it into a mysterious apartment which lay beyond the library and which was called, traditionally, no one knew why, the office. Whose office it had been and at what period it had flourished, she never learned; it was enough for her that it contained an echo and a pleasant musty smell and that it was a chamber of disgrace for old pieces of furniture whose infirmities were not always apparent (so that the disgrace seemed unmerited and rendered them victims of injustice) and with which, in the manner of children, she had established relations almost human, certainly dramatic. There was an old haircloth sofa in especial, to which she had confided a hundred childish sorrows. The place owed much of its mysterious melancholy to the fact that it was properly entered from the second door of the house, the door that had been condemned, and that it was secured by bolts which a particularly slender little girl found it impossible to slide. She knew that this silent, motionless portal opened into the street; if the sidelights had not been filled with green paper she might have looked out upon the little brown stoop and the well-worn brick pavement. But she had no wish to look out, for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side—a place which became to the child's imagination, according to its different moods, a region of delight or of terror.

It was in the 'office' still that Isabel was sitting on that melancholy afternoon of early spring which I have just mentioned. At this time she might have had the whole house to choose from, and the room she had selected was the most depressed of its scenes. She had never opened the bolted door nor removed the green paper (renewed by other hands) from its side-lights; she had never assured herself that the vulgar street lay beyond. A crude, cold rain fell heavily; the spring-time was indeed an appeal—and it seemed a cynical, insincere appeal—to patience. Isabel, however, gave as little heed as possible to cosmic treacheries; she kept her eyes on her book and tried to fix her mind. It had lately occurred to her that her mind was a good deal of a vagabond, and she had spent much ingenuity in training it to a military step and teaching it to advance, to halt, to retreat, to perform even more complicated manœuvres, at the word of command. Just now she had given it marching orders and it had been trudging over the sandy plains of a history of German Thought. Suddenly she became aware of a step very different from her own intellectual pace; she listened a little and perceived that some one was moving in the library, which communicated with the office. It struck her first as the step of a person from whom she was looking for a visit, then almost immediately announced itself as the tread of a woman and a stranger—her possible visitor being neither. It had an inquisitive, experimental quality which suggested that it would not stop short of the threshold of the office; and in fact the doorway of this apartment was presently occupied by a lady who paused there and looked very hard at our heroine. She was a plain, elderly woman, dressed in a

comprehensive waterproof mantle; she had a face with a good deal of rather violent point.

'Oh,' she began, 'is that where you usually sit?' She looked about at the heterogeneous chairs and tables.

'Not when I have visitors,' said Isabel, getting up to receive the intruder.

She directed their course back to the library while the visitor continued to look about her. 'You seem to have plenty of other rooms; they're in rather better condition. But everything's immensely worn.'

'Have you come to look at the house?' Isabel asked. 'The servant will show it to you.'

'Send her away; I don't want to buy it. She has probably gone to look for you and is wandering about upstairs; she didn't seem at all intelligent. You had better tell her it's no matter.' And then, since the girl stood there hesitating and wondering, this unexpected critic said to her abruptly: 'I suppose you're one of the daughters?'

Isabel thought she had very strange manners. 'It depends upon whose daughters you mean.'

'The late Mr Archer's—and my poor sister's.'

'Ah,' said Isabel slowly, 'you must be our crazy Aunt Lydia!'

'Is that what your father told you to call me? I'm your Aunt Lydia, but I'm not at all crazy: I haven't a delusion! And which of the daughters are you?'

'I'm the youngest of the three, and my name's Isabel.'

'Yes; the others are Lilian and Edith. And are you the prettiest?'

'I haven't the least idea,' said the girl.

'I think you must be.' And in this way the aunt and the niece made friends. The aunt had quarrelled years before with her brother-in-law, after the death of her sister, taking him to task for the manner in which he brought up his three girls. Being a high-tempered man he had requested her to mind her own business, and she had taken him at his word. For many years she held no communication with him and after his death had addressed not a word to his daughters, who had been bred in that disrespectful view to her which we have just seen Isabel betray. Mrs Touchett's behaviour was, as usual, perfectly deliberate. She intended to go to America to look after her investments (with which her husband, in spite of his great financial position, had nothing to do) and would take advantage of this opportunity to enquire into the condition of her nieces. There was no need of writing, for she should attach no importance to any account of them she should elicit by letter; she believed, always, in seeing for one's self. Isabel found, however, that she knew a good deal about them, and knew about the marriage of the two elder girls; knew that their poor father had left very little money, but that the house in Albany, which had passed into his hands, was to be sold for their benefit; knew, finally, that Edmund Ludlow, Lilian's husband, had taken upon himself to attend to this matter, in consideration of which the young couple, who had come to Albany during Mr Archer's illness, were remaining there for the present and, as well as Isabel herself, occupying the old place.

'How much money do you expect for it?' Mrs Touchett asked of her companion, who had brought her to sit in the front parlour, which she had inspected without enthusiasm.

'I haven't the least idea,' said the girl.

'That's the second time you have said that to me,' her aunt rejoined. 'And yet you don't look at all stupid.'

'I'm not stupid; but I don't know anything about money.'

'Yes, that's the way you were brought up—as if you were to inherit a million. What have you in point of fact inherited?'

'I really can't tell you. You must ask Edmund and Lilian; they'll be back in half an hour.'

'In Florence we should call it a very bad house,' said Mrs Touchett; 'but here, I dare say, it will bring a high price. It ought to make a considerable sum for each of you. In addition to that you *must* have something else; it's most extraordinary your not knowing. The position's of value, and they'll probably pull it down and make a row of shops. I wonder you don't do that yourself; you might let the shops to great advantage.'

Isabel stared; the idea of letting shops was new to her. 'I hope they won't pull it down,' she said; 'I'm extremely fond of it.'

'I don't see what makes you fond of it; your father died here.'

'Yes, but I don't dislike it for that,' the girl rather strangely returned. 'I like places in which things have happened—even if they're sad things. A great many people have died here; the place has been full

of life.'

'Is that what you call being full of life?'

'I mean full of experience—of people's feelings and sorrows. And not of their sorrows only, for I've been very happy here as a child.'

'You should go to Florence if you like houses in which things have happened—especially deaths. I live in an old palace in which three people have been murdered; three that were known and I don't know how many more besides.'

'In an old palace?' Isabel repeated.

'Yes, my dear; a very different affair from this. This is very bourgeois.'

Isabel felt some emotion, for she had always thought highly of her grandmother's house. But the emotion was of a kind which led her to say: 'I should like very much to go to Florence.'

'Well, if you'll be very good, and do everything I tell you I'll take you there,' Mrs Touchett declared.

Our young woman's emotion deepened; she flushed a little and smiled at her aunt in silence. 'Do everything you tell me? I don't think I can promise that.'

'No, you don't look like a person of that sort. You're fond of your own way; but it's not for me to blame you.'

'And yet, to go to Florence,' the girl exclaimed in a moment, 'I'd promise almost anything!'

Edmund and Lilian were slow to return, and Mrs Touchett had an hour's uninterrupted talk with her niece, who found her a strange and interesting figure: a figure essentially—almost the first she had ever met. She was as eccentric as Isabel had always supposed; and hitherto, whenever the girl had heard people described as eccentric, she had thought of them as offensive or alarming. The term had always suggested to her something grotesque and even sinister. But her aunt made it a matter of high but easy irony, or comedy, and led her to ask herself if the common tone, which was all she had known, had ever been as interesting.* No one certainly had on any occasion so held her as this little thin-lipped, bright-eyed, foreign-looking woman, who retrieved an insignificant appearance by a distinguished manner and, sitting there in a well-worn waterproof, talked with striking familiarity of the courts of Europe. There was nothing flighty about Mrs Touchett, but she recognised no social superiors, and, judging the great ones of the earth in a way that spoke of this, enjoyed the consciousness of making an impression on a candid and susceptible mind. Isabel at first had answered a good many questions, and it was from her answers apparently that Mrs Touchett derived a high opinion of her intelligence. But after this she had asked a good many, and her aunt's answers, whatever turn they took, struck her as food for deep reflexion. Mrs Touchett waited for the return of her other niece as long as she thought reasonable, but as at six o'clock Mrs Ludlow had not come in she prepared to take her departure.

'Your sister must be a great gossip. Is she accustomed to staying out so many hours?'

'You've been out almost as long as she,' Isabel replied; 'she can have left the house but a short time before you came in.'

Mrs Touchett looked at the girl without resentment; she appeared to enjoy a bold retort and to be disposed to be gracious. 'Perhaps she hasn't had so good an excuse as I. Tell her at any rate that she must come and see me this evening at that horrid hotel. She may bring her husband if she likes, but she needn't bring you. I shall see plenty of you later.'

IV

MRS LUDLOW was the eldest of the three sisters, and was usually thought the most sensible; the classification being in general that Lilian was the practical one, Edith the beauty and Isabel the 'intellectual' superior. Mrs Keyes, the second of the group, was the wife of an officer of the United States Engineers, and as our history is not further concerned with her it will suffice that she was indeed very pretty and that she formed the ornament of those various military stations, chiefly in the unfashionable West, to which, to her deep chagrin, her husband was successively relegated. Lilian had married a New York lawyer, a young man with a loud voice and an enthusiasm for his profession; the match was not brilliant, any more than Edith's, but Lilian had occasionally been spoken of as a young woman who might be thankful to marry at all—she was so much plainer than her sisters. She was, however, very happy, and now, as the mother of two peremptory little boys and the mistress of a wedge of brown stone violently driven into Fifty-third Street, seemed to exult in her condition as in a bold escape. She was short and solid, and her claim to figure was questioned, but she was conceded presence, though not majesty; she had moreover, as people said, improved since her marriage, and the two things in life of which she was most distinctly conscious were her husband's force in argument and her sister Isabel's originality. 'I've never kept up with Isabel—it would have taken *all* my time,' she had often remarked; in spite of which, however, she held her rather wistfully in sight; watching her as a motherly spaniel might watch a free greyhound. 'I want to see her safely married—that's what I want to see,' she frequently noted to her husband.

'Well, I must say I should have no particular desire to marry her,' Edmund Ludlow was accustomed to answer in an extremely audible tone.

'I know you say that for argument; you always take the opposite ground. I don't see what you've against her except that she's so original.'

'Well, I don't like originals; I like translations,' Mr Ludlow had more than once replied. 'Isabel's written in a foreign tongue.

I can't make her out. She ought to marry an Armenian or a Portuguese.'

'That's just what I'm afraid she'll do!' cried Lilian, who thought Isabel capable of anything.

She listened with great interest to the girl's account of Mrs Touchett's appearance and in the evening prepared to comply with their aunt's commands. Of what Isabel then said no report has remained, but her sister's words had doubtless prompted a word spoken to her husband as the two were making ready for their visit. 'I do hope immensely she'll do something handsome for Isabel; she has evidently taken a great fancy to her.'

'What is it you wish her to do?' Edmund Ludlow asked. 'Make her a big present?'

'No indeed; nothing of the sort. But take an interest in her—sympathise with her. She's evidently just the sort of person to appreciate her. She has lived so much in foreign society; she told Isabel all about it. You know you've always thought Isabel rather foreign.'

'You want her to give her a little foreign sympathy, eh? Don't you think she gets enough at home?'

'Well, she ought to go abroad,' said Mrs Ludlow. 'She's just the person to go abroad.'

'And you want the old lady to take her, is that it?'

'She has offered to take her—she's dying to have Isabel go. But what I want her to do when she gets her there is to give her all the advantages. I'm sure all we've got to do,' said Mrs Ludlow, 'is to give her a chance.'

'A chance for what?'

'A chance to develop.'

'Oh Moses!' Edmund Ludlow exclaimed. 'I hope she isn't going to develop any more!'

'If I were not sure you only said that for argument I should feel very badly,' his wife replied. 'But you know you love her.'

'*Do* you know I love you?' the young man said, jocosely, to Isabel a little later, while he brushed his hat.

'I'm sure I don't care whether you do or not!' exclaimed the girl; whose voice and smile, however, were less haughty than her words.

‘Oh, she feels so grand since Mrs Touchett’s visit,’ said her sister.

But Isabel challenged this assertion with a good deal of seriousness. ‘You must not say that, Lily. I don’t feel grand at all.’

‘I’m sure there’s no harm,’ said the conciliatory Lily.

‘Ah, but there’s nothing in Mrs Touchett’s visit to make one feel grand.’

‘Oh,’ exclaimed Ludlow, ‘she’s grander than ever!’

‘Whenever I feel grand,’ said the girl, ‘it will be for a better reason.’

Whether she felt grand or no, she at any rate felt different, felt as if something had happened to her. Left to herself for the evening she sat a while under the lamp, her hands empty, her usual avocations unheeded. Then she rose and moved about the room, and from one room to another, preferring the places where the vague lamplight expired. She was restless and even agitated; at moments she trembled a little. The importance of what had happened was out of proportion to its appearance; there had really been a change in her life. What it would bring with it was as yet extremely indefinite; but Isabel was in a situation that gave a value to any change. She had a desire to leave the past behind her and, as she said to herself, to begin afresh. This desire indeed was not a birth of the present occasion; it was as familiar as the sound of the rain upon the window and it had led to her beginning afresh a great many times. She closed her eyes as she sat in one of the dusky corners of the quiet parlour; but it was not with a desire for dozing forgetfulness. It was on the contrary because she felt too wide-eyed and wished to check the sense of seeing too many things at once. Her imagination was by habit ridiculously active; when the door was not open it jumped out of the window. She was not accustomed indeed to keep it behind bolts; and at important moments, when she would have been thankful to make use of her judgement alone, she paid the penalty of having given undue encouragement to the faculty of seeing without judging. At present, with her sense that the note of change had been struck, came gradually a host of images of the things she was leaving behind her. The years and hours of her life came back to her, and for a long time, in a stillness broken only by the ticking of the big bronze clock, she passed them in review. It had been a very happy life and she had been a very fortunate person—this was the truth that seemed to emerge most vividly. She had had the best of everything, and in a world in which the circumstances of so many people made them unenviable it was an advantage never to have known anything particularly unpleasant. It appeared to Isabel that the unpleasant had been even too absent from her knowledge, for she had gathered from her acquaintance with literature that it was often a source of interest and even of instruction. Her father had kept it away from her—her handsome, much-loved father, who always had such an aversion to it. It was a great felicity to have been his daughter; Isabel rose even to pride in her parentage. Since his death she had seemed to see him as turning his braver side to his children and as not having managed to ignore the ugly quite so much in practice as in aspiration. But this only made her tenderness for him greater; it was scarcely even painful to have to suppose him too generous, too good-natured, too indifferent to sordid considerations. Many persons had held that he carried this indifference too far, especially the large number of those to whom he owed money. Of their opinions Isabel was never very definitely informed; but it may interest the reader to know that, while they had recognised in the late Mr Archer a remarkably handsome head and a very taking manner (indeed, as one of them had said, he was always taking something), they had declared that he was making a very poor use of his life. He had squandered a substantial fortune, he had been deplorably convivial, he was known to have gambled freely. A few very harsh critics went so far as to say that he had not even brought up his daughters. They had had no regular education and no permanent home; they had been at once spoiled and neglected; they had lived with nursemaids and governesses (usually very bad ones) or had been sent to superficial schools, kept by the French, from which, at the end of a month, they had been removed in tears. This view of the matter would have excited Isabel’s indignation, for to her own sense her opportunities had been large. Even when her father had left his daughters for three months at Neufchatel with a French *bonne** who had eloped with a Russian nobleman staying at the same hotel—even in this irregular situation (an incident of the girl’s eleventh year) she had been neither frightened nor ashamed, but had thought it a romantic episode in a liberal education. Her father had a large way of looking at life, of which his restlessness and even his occasional incoherency of conduct had been only a proof. He wished his daughters, even as children, to see as much of the world as possible; and it was for this purpose that, before Isabel was fourteen, he had transported them three times across the Atlantic,* giving them on each occasion, however, but a few months’ view of the subject proposed: a course which had whetted our heroine’s curiosity without enabling her to satisfy it. She ought to have been a partisan of her father, for she was the member of his trio who most ‘made up’ to him for the disagreeables he didn’t mention. In his last days his general willingness to take leave of a world in which the difficulty of doing as one liked

appeared to increase as one grew older had been sensibly modified by the pain of separation from his clever, his superior, his remarkable girl. Later, when the journeys to Europe ceased, he still had shown his children all sorts of indulgence, and if he had been troubled about money-matters nothing ever disturbed their irreflective consciousness of many possessions. Isabel, though she danced very well, had not the recollection of having been in New York a successful member of the choreographic circle; her sister Edith was, as every one said, so very much more fetching. Edith was so striking an example of success that Isabel could have no illusions as to what constituted this advantage, or as to the limits of her own power to frisk and jump and shriek—above all with rightness of effect. Nineteen persons out of twenty (including the younger sister herself, pronounced Edith infinitely the prettier of the two; but the twentieth, besides reversing this judgement, had the entertainment of thinking all the others æsthetic vulgarians. Isabel had in the depths of her nature an even more unquenchable desire to please than Edith; but the depths of this young lady's nature were a very out-of-the-way place, between which and the surface communication was interrupted by a dozen capricious forces. She saw the young men who came in large numbers to see her sister; but as a general thing they were afraid of her; they had a belief that some special preparation was required for talking with her. Her reputation of reading a great deal hung about her like the cloudy envelope of a goddess in an epic; it was supposed to engender difficult questions and to keep the conversation at a low temperature. The poor girl liked to be thought clever, but she hated to be thought bookish; she used to read in secret and, though her memory was excellent, to abstain from showy reference. She had a great desire for knowledge, but she really preferred almost any source of information to the printed page; she had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering. She carried within herself a great fund of life, and her deepest enjoyment was to feel the continuity between the movements of her own soul and the agitations of the world. For this reason she was fond of seeing great crowds and large stretches of country, of reading about revolutions and wars, of looking at historical pictures—a class of efforts as to which she had often committed the conscious solecism of forgiving them much bad painting for the sake of the subject. While the Civil War went on she was still a very young girl; but she passed months of this long period in a state of almost passionate excitement, in which she felt herself at times (to her extreme confusion) stirred almost indiscriminately by the valour of either army. Of course the circumspection of suspicious swains had never gone the length of making her a social proscript; for the number of those whose hearts, as they approached her, beat only just fast enough to remind them they had heads as well, had kept her unacquainted with the supreme discipline of her sex and age. She had had everything a girl could have: kindness, admiration, bonbons, bouquets, the sense of exclusion from none of the privileges of the world she lived in, abundant opportunity for dancing, plenty of new dresses, the London *Spectator*, the latest publications, the music of Gounod, the poetry of Browning, the prose of George Eliot.*

These things now, as memory played over them, resolved themselves into a multitude of scenes and figures. Forgotten things came back to her; many others, which she had lately thought of great moment, dropped out of sight. The result was kaleidoscopic, but the movement of the instrument was checked at last by the servant's coming in with the name of a gentleman. The name of the gentleman was Caspar Goodwood; he was a straight young man from Boston, who had known Miss Archer for the last twelve-month and who, thinking her the most beautiful young woman of her time, had pronounced the time, according to the rule I have hinted at, a foolish period of history. He sometimes wrote to her and had within a week or two written from New York. She had thought it very possible he would come in—had indeed all the rainy day been vaguely expecting him. Now that she learned he was there, nevertheless, she felt no eagerness to receive him. He was the finest young man she had ever seen, was indeed quite a splendid young man; he inspired her with a sentiment of high, of rare respect. She had never felt equally moved to it by any other person. He was supposed by the world in general to wish to marry her, but this of course was between themselves. It at least may be affirmed that he had travelled from New York to Albany expressly to see her; having learned in the former city, where he was spending a few days and where he had hoped to find her, that she was still at the State capital. Isabel delayed for some minutes to go to him; she moved about the room with a new sense of complications. But at last she presented herself and found him standing near the lamp. He was tall, strong and somewhat stiff; he was also lean and brown. He was not romantically, he was much rather obscurely, handsome; but his physiognomy had an air of requesting your attention, which it rewarded according to the charm you found in blue eyes of remarkable fixedness, the eyes of a complexion other than his own, and a jaw of the somewhat angular mould which is supposed to bespeak resolution. Isabel said to herself that it bespoke resolution to-night; in spite of which, in half an hour, Caspar Goodwood, who had arrived hopeful as well as resolute, took his way back to his lodging with the feeling of a man defeated. He was not, it may be added, a man weakly to accept defeat.

V

RALPH TOUCHETT was a philosopher, but nevertheless he knocked at his mother's door (at a quarter to seven) with a good deal of eagerness. Even philosophers have their preferences, and it must be admitted that of his progenitors his father ministered most to his sense of the sweetness of filial dependence. His father, as he had often said to himself, was the more motherly; his mother, on the other hand, was paternal, and even, according to the slang of the day, gubernatorial. She was nevertheless very fond of her only child and had always insisted on his spending three months of the year with her. Ralph rendered perfect justice to her affection and knew that in her thoughts and her thoroughly arranged and servanted life his turn always came after the other nearest subjects of her solicitude, the various punctualities of performance of the workers of her will. He found her completely dressed for dinner, but she embraced her boy with her gloved hands and made him sit on the sofa beside her. She enquired scrupulously about her husband's health and about the young man's own, and, receiving no very brilliant account of either, remarked that she was more than ever convinced of her wisdom in not exposing herself to the English climate. In this case she also might have given way. Ralph smiled at the idea of his mother's giving way, but made no point of reminding her that his own infirmity was not the result of the English climate, from which he absented himself for a considerable part of each year.

He had been a very small boy when his father, Daniel Tracy Touchett, a native of Rutland, in the State of Vermont, came to England as subordinate partner in a banking-house where some ten years later he gained preponderant control. Daniel Touchett saw before him a life-long residence in his adopted country, of which, from the first, he took a simple, sane and accommodating view. But, as he said to himself, he had no intention of disamericanising, nor had he a desire to teach his only son any such subtle art. It had been for himself so very soluble a problem to live in England assimilated yet unconverted that it seemed to him equally simple his lawful heir should after his death carry on the grey old bank in the white American light. He was at pains to intensify this light, however, by sending the boy home for his education. Ralph spent several terms at an American school and took a degree at an American university, after which, as he struck his father on his return as even redundantly native, he was placed for some three years in residence at Oxford. Oxford swallowed up Harvard, and Ralph became at last English enough. His outward conformity to the manners that surrounded him was none the less the mask of a mind that greatly enjoyed its independence, on which nothing long imposed itself, and which, naturally inclined to adventure and irony, indulged in a boundless liberty of appreciation. He began with being a young man of promise; at Oxford he distinguished himself, to his father's ineffable satisfaction, and the people about him said it was a thousand pities so clever a fellow should be shut out from a career. He might have had a career by returning to his own country (though this point is shrouded in uncertainty) and even if Mr Touchett had been willing to part with him (which was not the case) it would have gone hard with him to put a watery waste permanently between himself and the old man whom he regarded as his best friend. Ralph was not only fond of his father, he admired him—he enjoyed the opportunity of observing him. Daniel Touchett, to his perception, was a man of genius, and though he himself had no aptitude for the banking mystery he made a point of learning enough of it to measure the great figure his father had played. It was not this, however, he mainly relished; it was the fine ivory surface, polished as by the English air, that the old man had opposed to possibilities of penetration. Daniel Touchett had been neither at Harvard nor at Oxford, and it was his own fault if he had placed in his son's hands the key to modern criticism. Ralph, whose head was full of ideas which his father had never guessed, had a high esteem for the latter's originality. Americans, rightly or wrongly, are commended for the ease with which they adapt themselves to foreign conditions; but Mr Touchett had made of the very limits of his pliancy half the ground of his general success. He had retained in their freshness most of his marks of primary pressure; his tone, as his son always noted with pleasure, was that of the more luxuriant parts of New England. At the end of his life he had become, on his own ground, as mellow as he was rich; he combined consummate shrewdness with the disposition superficially to fraternise, and his 'social position,' on which he had never wasted a care, had the firm perfection of an unthumbed fruit. It was perhaps his want of imagination and of what is called the historic consciousness; but to many of the impressions usually made by English life upon the cultivated stranger his sense was completely closed. There were certain differences he had never perceived, certain habits he had never formed, certain obscurities he had never sounded. As regards these latter, on the day he *had* sounded

them his son would have thought less well of him.

Ralph, on leaving Oxford, had spent a couple of years in travelling; after which he had found himself perched on a high stool in his father's bank. The responsibility and honour of such positions is not, I believe, measured by the height of the stool, which depends upon other considerations: Ralph, indeed, who had very long legs, was fond of standing, and even of walking about, at his work. To this exercise, however, he was obliged to devote but a limited period, for at the end of some eighteen months he had become aware of his being seriously out of health. He had caught a violent cold, which fixed itself on his lungs and threw them into dire confusion. He had to give up work and apply, to the letter, the sorry injunction to take care of himself. At first he slighted the task; it appeared to him it was not himself in the least he was taking care of, but an uninteresting and uninterested person with whom he had nothing in common. This person, however, improved on acquaintance, and Ralph grew at last to have a certain grudging tolerance, even an undemonstrative respect, for him. Misfortune makes strange bedfellows, and our young man, feeling that he had something at stake in the matter—it usually struck him as his reputation for ordinary wit—devoted to his graceless charge an amount of attention of which note was duly taken and which had at least the effect of keeping the poor fellow alive. One of his lungs began to heal, the other promised to follow its example, and he was assured he might outweather a dozen winters if he would betake himself to those climates in which consumptives chiefly congregate. As he had grown extremely fond of London, he cursed the flatness of exile: but at the same time that he cursed he conformed, and gradually, when he found his sensitive organ grateful even for grim favours, he conferred them with a lighter hand. He wintered abroad,* as the phrase is; basked in the sun, stopped at home when the wind blew, went to bed when it rained, and once or twice, when it had snowed overnight, almost never got up again.

A secret hoard of indifference—like a thick cake a fond old nurse might have slipped into his first school outfit—came to his aid and helped to reconcile him to sacrifice; since at the best he was too ill for aught but that arduous game. As he said to himself, there was really nothing he had wanted very much to do, so that he had at least not renounced the field of valour. At present, however, the fragrance of forbidden fruit seemed occasionally to float past him and remind him that the finest of pleasures is the rush of action. Living as he now lived was like reading a good book in a poor translation—a meagre entertainment for a young man who felt that he might have been an excellent linguist. He had good winters and poor winters, and while the former lasted he was sometimes the sport of a vision of virtual recovery. But this vision was dispelled some three years before the occurrence of the incidents with which this history opens: he had on that occasion remained later than usual in England and had been overtaken by bad weather before reaching Algiers. He arrived more dead than alive and lay there for several weeks between life and death. His convalescence was a miracle, but the first use he made of it was to assure himself that such miracles happen but once. He said to himself that his hour was in sight and that it behoved him to keep his eyes upon it, yet that it was also open to him to spend the interval as agreeably as might be consistent with such a preoccupation. With the prospect of losing them the simple use of his faculties became an exquisite pleasure; it seemed to him the joys of contemplation had never been sounded. He was far from the time when he had found it hard that he should be obliged to give up the idea of distinguishing himself; an idea none the less importunate for being vague and none the less delightful for having had to struggle in the same breast with bursts of inspiring self-criticism. His friends at present judged him more cheerful, and attributed it to a theory, over which they shook their heads knowingly, that he would recover his health. His serenity was but the array of wild flowers niched in his ruin.

It was very probably this sweet-tasting property of the observed thing in itself that was mainly concerned in Ralph's quickly-stirred interest in the advent of a young lady who was evidently not insipid. If he was consideringly disposed, something told him, here was occupation enough for a succession of days. It may be added, in summary fashion, that the imagination of loving—as distinguished from that of being loved—had still a place in his reduced sketch. He had only forbidden himself the riot of expression.* However, he shouldn't inspire his cousin with a passion, nor would she be able, even should she try, to help him to one. 'And now tell me about the young lady,' he said to his mother. 'What do you mean to do with her?'

Mrs Touchett was prompt. 'I mean to ask your father to invite her to stay three or four weeks at Gardencourt.'

'You needn't stand on any such ceremony as that,' said Ralph. 'My father will ask her as a matter of course.'

'I don't know about that. She's my niece; she's not his.'

‘Good Lord, dear mother; what a sense of property! That’s all the more reason for his asking her. But after that—I mean after three months (for it’s absurd asking the poor girl to remain but for three or four paltry weeks)—what do you mean to do with her?’

‘I mean to take her to Paris. I mean to get her clothing.’

‘Ah yes, that’s of course. But independently of that?’

‘I shall invite her to spend the autumn with me in Florence.’

‘You don’t rise above detail, dear mother,’ said Ralph. ‘I should like to know what you mean to do with her in a general way.’

‘My duty!’ Mrs Touchett declared. ‘I suppose you pity her very much,’ she added.

‘No, I don’t think I pity her. She doesn’t strike me as inviting compassion. I think I envy her. Before being sure, however, give me a hint of where you see your duty.’

‘In showing her four European countries—I shall leave her the choice of two of them—and in giving her the opportunity of perfecting herself in French, which she already knows very well.’

Ralph frowned a little. ‘That sounds rather dry—even allowing her the choice of two of the countries.’

‘If it’s dry,’ said his mother with a laugh, ‘you can leave Isabel alone to water it! She is as good as a summer rain, any day.’

‘Do you mean she’s a gifted being?’

‘I don’t know whether she’s a gifted being, but she’s a clever girl—with a strong will and a high temper. She has no idea of being bored.’

‘I can imagine that,’ said Ralph; and then he added abruptly: ‘How do you two get on?’

‘Do you mean by that that I’m a bore? I don’t think she finds me one. Some girls might, I know; but Isabel’s too clever for that. I think I greatly amuse her. We get on because I understand her; I know the sort of girl she is. She’s very frank, and I’m very frank: we know just what to expect of each other.’

‘Ah, dear mother,’ Ralph exclaimed, ‘one always knows what to expect of *you*! You’ve never surprised me but once, and that’s today—in presenting me with a pretty cousin whose existence I had never suspected.’

‘Do you think her so very pretty?’

‘Very pretty indeed; but I don’t insist upon that. It’s her general air of being some one in particular that strikes me. Who is this rare creature, and what is she? Where did you find her, and how did you make her acquaintance?’

‘I found her in an old house at Albany, sitting in a dreary room on a rainy day, reading a heavy book and boring herself to death. She didn’t know she was bored, but when I left her no doubt of it she seemed very grateful for the service. You may say I shouldn’t have enlightened her—I should have let her alone. There’s a good deal in that, but I acted conscientiously; I thought she was meant for something better. It occurred to me that it would be a kindness to take her about and introduce her to the world. She thinks she knows a great deal of it—like most American girls; but like most American girls she’s ridiculously mistaken. If you want to know, I thought she would do me credit. I like to be well thought of, and for a woman of my age there’s no greater convenience, in some ways, than an attractive niece. You know I had seen nothing of my sister’s children for years; I disapproved entirely of the father. But I always meant to do something for them when he should have gone to his reward. I ascertained where they were to be found and, without any preliminaries, went and introduced myself. There are two others of them, both of whom are married; but I saw only the elder, who has, by the way, a very uncivil husband. The wife, whose name is Lily, jumped at the idea of my taking an interest in Isabel; she said it was just what her sister needed—that some one should take an interest in her. She spoke of her as you might speak of some young person of genius—in want of encouragement and patronage. It may be that Isabel’s a genius; but in that case I’ve not yet learned her special line. Mrs Ludlow was especially keen about my taking her to Europe; they all regard Europe over there as a land of emigration, of rescue, a refuge for their superfluous population. Isabel herself seemed very glad to come, and the thing was easily arranged. There was a little difficulty about the money-question, as she seemed averse to being under pecuniary obligations. But she has a small income and she supposes herself to be travelling at her own expense.’

Ralph had listened attentively to this judicious report, by which his interest in the subject of it was not impaired. ‘Ah, if she’s a genius,’ he said, ‘we must find out her special line. Is it by chance for flirting?’

‘I don’t think so. You may suspect that at first, but you’ll be wrong. You won’t, I think, in any way, be easily right about her.’

‘Warburton’s wrong then!’ Ralph rejoicingly exclaimed. ‘He flatters himself he has made that discovery.’

His mother shook her head. ‘Lord Warburton won’t understand her. He needn’t try.’

‘He’s very intelligent,’ said Ralph; ‘but it’s right he should be puzzled once in a while.’

‘Isabel will enjoy puzzling a lord,’ Mrs Touchett remarked.

Her son frowned a little. ‘What does she know about lords?’

‘Nothing at all: that will puzzle him all the more.’

Ralph greeted these words with a laugh and looked out of the window. Then, ‘Are you not going down to see my father?’ he asked.

‘At a quarter to eight,’ said Mrs Touchett.

Her son looked at his watch. ‘You’ve another quarter of an hour then. Tell me some more about Isabel.’ After which, as Mrs Touchett declined his invitation, declaring that he must find out for himself, ‘Well,’ he pursued, ‘she’ll certainly do you credit. But won’t she also give you trouble?’

‘I hope not; but if she does I shall not shrink from it. I never do that.’

‘She strikes me as very natural,’ said Ralph.

‘Natural people are not the most trouble.’

‘No,’ said Ralph; ‘you yourself are a proof of that. You’re extremely natural, and I’m sure you have never troubled any one. It *takes* trouble to do that. But tell me this; it just occurs to me. Is Isabel capable of making herself disagreeable?’

‘Ah,’ cried his mother, ‘you ask too many questions! Find that out for yourself.’

His questions, however, were not exhausted. ‘All this time,’ he said, ‘you’ve not told me what you intend to do with her.’

‘Do with her? You talk as if she were a yard of calico. I shall do absolutely nothing with her, and she herself will do everything she chooses. She gave me notice of that.’

‘What you meant then, in your telegram, was that her character’s independent.’

‘I never know what I mean in my telegrams—especially those I send from America. Clearness is too expensive. Come down to your father.’

‘It’s not yet a quarter to eight,’ said Ralph.

‘I must allow for his impatience,’ Mrs Touchett answered.

Ralph knew what to think of his father’s impatience; but, making no rejoinder, he offered his mother his arm. This put it in his power, as they descended together, to stop her a moment on the middle landing of the staircase—the broad, low, wide-armed staircase of time-blackened oak which was one of the most striking features of Gardencourt. ‘You’ve no plan of marrying her?’ he smiled.

‘Marrying her? I should be sorry to play her such a trick! But apart from that, she’s perfectly able to marry herself. She has every facility.’

‘Do you mean to say she has a husband picked out?’

‘I don’t know about a husband, but there’s a young man in Boston—!’

Ralph went on; he had no desire to hear about the young man in Boston. ‘As my father says, they’re always engaged!’

His mother had told him that he must satisfy his curiosity at the source, and it soon became evident he should not want for occasion. He had a good deal of talk with his young kinswoman when the two had been left together in the drawing-room. Lord Warburton, who had ridden over from his own house, some ten miles distant, remounted and took his departure before dinner; and an hour after this meal was ended Mr and Mrs Touchett, who appeared to have quite emptied the measure of their forms, withdrew, under the valid pretext of fatigue, to their respective apartments. The young man spent an hour with his cousin; though she had been travelling half the day she appeared in no degree spent. She was really tired; she knew it, and knew she should pay for it on the morrow; but it was her habit at this period to carry exhaustion to the furtherest point and confess to it only when dissimulation broke down. A fine hypocrisy was for the present possible; she was interested; she was, as she said to herself, floated. She asked Ralph to show her the pictures; there were a great many in the house, most of them of his own choosing. The best were arranged in an oaken gallery, of charming proportions, which had a sitting-room at either end of it and which in the evening was usually lighted. The light was insufficient to show the pictures to advantage, and the visit might have stood over to the morrow. This suggestion Ralph had ventured to make; but Isabel looked disappointed—smiling still, however—and said: ‘If you please I should like to see

them just a little.' She was eager, she knew she was eager and now seemed so; she couldn't help it. 'She doesn't take suggestions,' Ralph said to himself; but he said it without irritation; her pressure amused and even pleased him. The lamps were on brackets, at intervals, and if the light was imperfect it was genial. It fell upon the vague squares of rich colour and on the faded gilding of heavy frames; it made a sheen on the polished floor of the gallery. Ralph took a candlestick and moved about, pointing out the things he liked; Isabel, inclining to one picture after another, indulged in little exclamations and murmurs. She was evidently a judge; she had a natural taste; he was struck with that. She took a candlestick herself and held it slowly here and there; she lifted it high, and as she did so he found himself pausing in the middle of the place and bending his eyes much less upon the pictures than on her presence. He lost nothing, in truth, by these wandering glances, for she was better worth looking at than most works of art. She was undeniably spare, and ponderably light, and proveably tall; when people had wished to distinguish her from the other two Miss Archers they had always called her the willowy one. Her hair, which was dark even to blackness, had been an object of envy to many women; her light grey eyes, a little too firm perhaps in her graver moments, had an enchanting range of concession. They walked slowly up one side of the gallery and down the other, and then she said: 'Well, now I know more than I did when I began!'

'You apparently have a great passion for knowledge,' her cousin returned.

'I think I have; most girls are horridly ignorant.'

'You strike me as different from most girls.'

'Ah, some of them *would*—but the way they're talked to!' murmured Isabel, who preferred not to dilate just yet on herself. Then in a moment, to change the subject, 'Please tell me—isn't there a ghost?' she went on.

'A ghost?'

'A castle-spectre, a thing that appears. We call them ghosts in America.'

'So we do here, when we see them.'

'You do see them then? You ought to, in this romantic old house.'

'It's not a romantic old house,' said Ralph. 'You'll be disappointed if you count on that. It's a dismally prosaic one; there's no romance here but what you may have brought with you.'

'I've brought a great deal; but it seems to me I've brought it to the right place.'

'To keep it out of harm, certainly; nothing will ever happen to it here, between my father and me.'

Isabel looked at him a moment. 'Is there never any one here but your father and you?'

'My mother, of course.'

'Oh, I know your mother; she's not romantic. Haven't you other people?'

'Very few.'

'I'm sorry for that; I like so much to see people.'

'Oh, we'll invite all the county to amuse you,' said Ralph.

'Now you're making fun of me,' the girl answered rather gravely.
'Who was the gentleman on the lawn when I arrived?'

'A county neighbour; he doesn't come very often.'

'I'm sorry for that; I liked him,' said Isabel.

'Why, it seemed to me that you barely spoke to him,' Ralph objected.

'Never mind, I like him all the same. I like your father too, immensely.'

'You can't do better than that. He's the dearest of the dear.'

'I'm so sorry he is ill,' said Isabel.

'You must help me to nurse him; you ought to be a good nurse.'

'I don't think I am; I've been told I'm not; I'm said to have too many theories. But you haven't told me about the ghost,' she added.

Ralph, however, gave no heed to this observation. 'You like my father and you like Lord Warburton. I infer also that you like my mother.'

'I like your mother very much, because—because—' And Isabel found herself attempting to assign a reason for her affection for Mrs Touchett.

'Ah, we never know why!' said her companion, laughing.

'I always know why,' the girl answered. 'It's because she doesn't expect one to like her. She doesn't care whether one does or not.'

‘So you adore her—out of perversity? Well, I take greatly after my mother,’ said Ralph.

‘I don’t believe you do at all. You wish people to like you, and you try to make them do it.’

‘Good heavens, how you see through one!’ he cried with a dismay that was not altogether jocular.

‘But I like you all the same,’ his cousin went on. ‘The way to clinch the matter will be to show me the ghost.’

Ralph shook his head sadly. ‘I might show it to you, but you’d never see it. The privilege isn’t given to every one; it’s not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it. I saw it long ago,’ said Ralph.

‘I told you just now I’m very fond of knowledge,’ Isabel answered.

‘Yes, of happy knowledge—of pleasant knowledge. But you haven’t suffered, and you’re not made to suffer. I hope you’ll never see the ghost!’

She had listened to him attentively, with a smile on her lips, but with a certain gravity in her eyes. Charming as he found her, she had struck him as rather presumptuous—indeed it was a part of her charm; and he wondered what she would say. ‘I’m not afraid, you know,’ she said: which seemed quite presumptuous enough.

‘You’re not afraid of suffering?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid of suffering. But I’m not afraid of ghosts. And I think people suffer too easily,’ she added.

‘I don’t believe *you* do,’ said Ralph, looking at her with his hands in his pockets.

‘I don’t think that’s a fault,’ she answered. ‘It’s not absolutely necessary to suffer; we were not made for that.’

‘You were not, certainly.’

‘I’m not speaking of myself.’ And she wandered off a little.

‘No, it isn’t a fault,’ said her cousin. ‘It’s a merit to be strong.’

‘Only, if you don’t suffer they call you hard,’ Isabel remarked.

They passed out of the smaller drawing-room, into which they had returned from the gallery, and paused in the hall, at the foot of the staircase. Here Ralph presented his companion with her bedroom candle, which he had taken from a niche. ‘Never mind what they call you. When you do suffer they call you an idiot. The great point’s to be as happy as possible.’

She looked at him a little; she had taken her candle and placed her foot on the oaken stair. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘that’s what I came to Europe for, to be as happy as possible. Good-night.’

‘Good-night! I wish you all success, and shall be very glad to contribute to it!’

She turned away, and he watched her as she slowly ascended. Then, with his hands always in his pockets, he went back to the empty drawing-room.

VI

ISABEL ARCHER was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active. It had been her fortune to possess a finer mind than most of the persons among whom her lot was cast; to have a larger perception of surrounding facts and to care for knowledge that was tinged with the unfamiliar. It is true that among her contemporaries she passed for a young woman of extraordinary profundity; for these excellent people never withheld their admiration from a reach of intellect of which they themselves were not conscious, and spoke of Isabel as a prodigy of learning, a creature reported to have read the classic authors—in translations. Her paternal aunt, Mrs Varian, once spread the rumour that Isabel was writing a book—Mrs Varian having a reverence for books, and averred that the girl would distinguish herself in print. Mrs Varian thought highly of literature, for which she entertained that esteem that is connected with a sense of privation. Her own large house, remarkable for its assortment of mosaic tables and decorated ceilings, was unfurnished with a library, and in the way of printed volumes contained nothing but half a dozen novels in paper on a shelf in the apartment of one of the Miss Varians. Practically, Mrs Varian's acquaintance with literature was confined to *The New York Interviewer*; as she very justly said, after you had read the *Interviewer* you had lost all faith in culture. Her tendency, with this, was rather to keep the *Interviewer* out of the way of her daughters; she was determined to bring them up properly, and they read nothing at all. Her impression with regard to Isabel's labours was quite illusory; the girl had never attempted to write a book and had no desire for the laurels of authorship. She had no talent for expression and too little of the consciousness of genius; she only had a general idea that people were right when they treated her as if she were rather superior. Whether or no she were superior, people were right in admiring her if they thought her so; for it seemed to her often that her mind moved more quickly than theirs, and this encouraged an impatience that might easily be confounded with superiority. It may be affirmed without delay that Isabel was probably very liable to the sin of self-esteem; she often surveyed with complacency the field of her own nature; she was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right; she treated herself to occasions of homage. Meanwhile her errors and delusions were frequently such as a biographer interested in preserving the dignity of his subject must shrink from specifying. Her thoughts were a tangle of vague outlines which had never been corrected by the judgement of people speaking with authority. In matters of opinion she had had her own way, and it had led her into a thousand ridiculous zigzags. At moments she discovered she was grotesquely wrong, and then she treated herself to a week of passionate humility. After this she held her head higher than ever again; for it was of no use, she had an unquenchable desire to think well of herself. She had a theory that it was only under this provision life was worth living; that one should be one of the best, should be conscious of a fine organisation (she couldn't help knowing her organisation was fine), should move in a realm of light, of natural wisdom, of happy impulse, of inspiration gracefully chronic. It was almost as unnecessary to cultivate doubt of one's self as to cultivate doubt of one's best friend: one should try to be one's own best friend and to give one's self, in this manner, distinguished company. The girl had a certain nobleness of imagination which rendered her a good many services and played her a great many tricks. She spent half her time in thinking of beauty and bravery and magnanimity; she had a fixed determination to regard the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action: she held it must be detestable to be afraid or ashamed. She had an infinite hope that she should never do anything wrong. She had resented so strongly, after discovering them, her mere errors of feeling (the discovery always made her tremble as if she had escaped from a trap which might have caught her and smothered her) that the chance of inflicting a sensible injury upon another person, presented only as a contingency, caused her at moments to hold her breath. That always struck her as the worst thing that could happen to her. On the whole, reflectively, she was in no uncertainty about the things that were wrong. She had no love of their look, but when she fixed them hard she recognised them. It was wrong to be mean, to be jealous, to be false, to be cruel; she had seen very little of the evil of the world, but she had seen women who lied and who tried to hurt each other. Seeing such things had quickened her high spirit; it seemed indecent not to scorn them. Of course the danger of a high spirit was the danger of inconsistency—the danger of keeping up the flag after the place has surrendered; a sort of behaviour so crooked as to be almost a dishonour to the flag. But Isabel, who knew little of the sorts of artillery to which young women are exposed, flattered herself that such contradictions would never be noted in her own conduct. Her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce; she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was. Sometimes she went so

far as to wish that she might find herself some day in a difficult position, so that she should have the pleasure of being as heroic as the occasion demanded. Altogether, with her meagre knowledge, her inflated ideals, her confidence at once innocent and dogmatic, her temper at once exacting and indulgent, her mixture of curiosity and fastidiousness, of vivacity and indifference, her desire to look very well and to be if possible even better, her determination to see, to try, to know, her combination of the delicate, desultory, flame-like spirit and the eager and personal creature of conditions: she would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader's part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant.

It was one of her theories that Isabel Archer was very fortunate in being independent, and that she ought to make some very enlightened use of that state. She never called it the state of solitude, much less of singleness; she thought such descriptions weak, and, besides, her sister Lily constantly urged her to come and abide. She had a friend whose acquaintance she had made shortly before her father's death, who offered so high an example of useful activity that Isabel always thought of her as a model. Henrietta Stackpole had the advantage of an admired ability; she was thoroughly launched in journalism, and her letters to the *Interviewer*, from Washington, Newport, the White Mountains and other places, were universally quoted. Isabel pronounced them with confidence 'ephemeral,' but she esteemed the courage, energy and good-humour of the writer, who, without parents and without property, had adopted three of the children of an infirm and widowed sister and was paying their school-bills out of the proceeds of her literary labour. Henrietta was in the van of progress and had clear-cut views on most subjects; her cherished desire had long been to come to Europe and write a series of letters to the *Interviewer* from the radical point of view—an enterprise the less difficult as she knew perfectly in advance what her opinions would be and to how many objections most European institutions lay open. When she heard that Isabel was coming she wished to start at once; thinking, naturally, that it would be delightful the two should travel together. She had been obliged, however, to postpone this enterprise. She thought Isabel a glorious creature, and had spoken of her covertly in some of her letters, though she never mentioned the fact to her friend, who would not have taken pleasure in it and was not a regular student of the *Interviewer*. Henrietta, for Isabel, was chiefly a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy. Her resources were of the obvious kind; but even if one had not the journalistic talent and a genius for guessing, as Henrietta said, what the public was going to want, one was not therefore to conclude that one had no vocation, no beneficent aptitude of any sort, and resign one's self to being frivolous and hollow. Isabel was stoutly determined not to be hollow. If one should wait with the right patience one would find some happy work to one's hand. Of course, among her theories, this young lady was not without a collection of views on the subject of marriage. The first on the list was a conviction of the vulgarity of thinking too much of it. From lapsing into eagerness on this point she earnestly prayed she might be delivered; she held that a woman ought to be able to live to herself, in the absence of exceptional flimsiness, and that it was perfectly possible to be happy without the society of a more or less coarse-minded person of another sex. The girl's prayer was very sufficiently answered; something pure and proud that there was in her—something cold and dry an unappreciated suitor with a taste for analysis might have called it—had hitherto kept her from any great vanity of conjecture on the article of possible husbands. Few of the men she saw seemed worth a ruinous expenditure, and it made her smile to think that one of them should present himself as an incentive to hope and a reward of patience. Deep in her soul—it was the deepest thing there—lay a belief that if a certain light should dawn she could give herself completely; but this image, on the whole, was too formidable to be attractive. Isabel's thoughts hovered about it, but they seldom rested on it long; after a little it ended in alarms. It often seemed to her that she thought too much about herself; you could have made her colour, any day in the year, by calling her a rank egoist. She was always planning out her development, desiring her perfection, observing her progress. Her nature had, in her conceit, a certain garden-like quality, a suggestion of perfume and murmuring boughs, of shady bowers and lengthening vistas, which made her feel that introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air, and that a visit to the recesses of one's spirit was harmless when one returned from it with a lapful of roses. But she was often reminded that there were other gardens in the world than those of her remarkable soul, and that there were moreover a great many places which were not gardens at all—only dusky pestiferous tracts, planted thick with ugliness and misery. In the current of that repaid curiosity on which she had lately been floating, which had conveyed her to this beautiful old England and might carry her much further still, she often checked herself with the thought of the thousands of people who were less happy than herself—a thought which for the moment made her fine, full consciousness appear a kind of immodesty. What should one do with the misery of the world in a scheme of the agreeable for one's self? It must be confessed that this question never held her long. She was too young, too impatient to live, too unacquainted with pain. She always returned to her theory that

a young woman whom after all every one thought clever should begin by getting a general impression of life. This impression was necessary to prevent mistakes, and after it should be secured she might make the unfortunate condition of others a subject of special attention.

England was a revelation to her, and she found herself as diverted as a child at a pantomime. In her infantine excursions to Europe she had seen only the Continent, and seen it from the nursery window; Paris, not London, was her father's Mecca, and into many of his interests there his children had naturally not entered. The images of that time moreover had grown faint and remote, and the old-world quality in everything that she now saw had all the charm of strangeness. Her uncle's house seemed a picture made real; no refinement of the agreeable was lost upon Isabel; the rich perfection of Gardencourt at once revealed a world and gratified a need. The large, low rooms, with brown ceilings and dusky corners, the deep embrasures and curious casements, the quiet light on dark, polished panels, the deep greenness outside, that seemed always peeping in, the sense of well-ordered privacy in the centre of a 'property'—a place where sounds were felicitously accidental, where the tread was muffled by the earth itself and in the thick mild air all friction dropped out of contact and all shrillness out of talk—these things were much to the taste of our young lady, whose taste played a considerable part in her emotions. She formed a fast friendship with her uncle, and often sat by his chair when he had had it moved out to the lawn. He passed hours in the open air, sitting with folded hands like a placid, homely household god, a god of service, who had done his work and received his wages and was trying to grow used to weeks and months made up only of off-days. Isabel amused him more than she suspected—the effect she produced upon people was often different from what she supposed—and he frequently gave himself the pleasure of making her chatter. It was by this term that he qualified her conversation, which had much of the 'point' observable in that of the young ladies of her country, to whom the ear of the world is more directly presented than to their sisters in other lands. Like the mass of American girls Isabel had been encouraged to express herself; her remarks had been attended to; she had been expected to have emotions and opinions. Many of her opinions had doubtless but a slender value, many of her emotions passed away in the utterance; but they had left a trace in giving her the habit of seeming at least to feel and think, and in imparting moreover to her words when she was really moved that prompt vividness which so many people had regarded as a sign of superiority. Mr Touchett used to think that she reminded him of his wife when his wife was in her teens. It was because she was fresh and natural and quick to understand, to speak—so many characteristics of her niece—that he had fallen in love with Mrs Touchett. He never expressed this analogy to the girl herself, however; for if Mrs Touchett had once been like Isabel, Isabel was not at all like Mrs Touchett. The old man was full of kindness for her; it was a long time, as he said, since they had had any young life in the house; and our rustling, quickly-moving, clear-voiced heroine was as agreeable to his sense as the sound of flowing water. He wanted to do something for her and wished she would ask it of him. She would ask nothing but questions; it is true that of these she asked a quantity. Her uncle had a great fund of answers, though her pressure sometimes came in forms that puzzled him. She questioned him immensely about England, about the British constitution, the English character, the state of politics, the manners and customs of the royal family, the peculiarities of the aristocracy, the way of living and thinking of his neighbours; and in begging to be enlightened on these points she usually enquired whether they corresponded with the descriptions in the books. The old man always looked at her a little with his fine dry smile while he smoothed down the shawl spread across his legs.

'The books?' he once said; 'well, I don't know much about the books. You must ask Ralph about that. I've always ascertained for myself—got my information in the natural form. I never asked many questions even; I just kept quiet and took notice. Of course I've had very good opportunities—better than what a young lady would naturally have. I'm of an inquisitive disposition, though you mightn't think it if you were to watch me: however much you might watch me I should be watching you more. I've been watching these people for upwards of thirty-five years, and I don't hesitate to say that I've acquired considerable information. It's a very fine country on the whole—finer perhaps than what we give it credit for on the other side. There are several improvements I should like to see introduced; but the necessity of them doesn't seem to be generally felt as yet. When the necessity of a thing is generally felt they usually manage to accomplish it; but they seem to feel pretty comfortable about waiting till then. I certainly feel more at home among them than I expected to when I first came over; I suppose it's because I've had a considerable degree of success. When you're successful you naturally feel more at home.'

'Do you suppose that if I'm successful I shall feel at home?' Isabel asked.

'I should think it very probable, and you certainly will be successful. They like American young ladies very much over here; they show them a great deal of kindness. But you mustn't feel too much at home, you know.'

‘Oh, I’m by no means sure it will *satisfy* me,’ Isabel judicially emphasised. ‘I like the place very much, but I’m not sure I shall like the people.’

‘The people are very good people; especially if you like them.’

‘I’ve no doubt they’re good,’ Isabel rejoined; ‘but are they pleasant in society? They won’t rob me nor beat me; but will they make themselves agreeable to me? That’s what I like people to do. I don’t hesitate to say so, because I always appreciate it. I don’t believe they’re very nice to girls; they’re not nice to them in the novels.’

‘I don’t know about the novels,’ said Mr Touchett. ‘I believe the novels have a great deal of ability, but I don’t suppose they’re very accurate. We once had a lady who wrote novels staying here; she was a friend of Ralph’s and he asked her down. She was very positive, quite up to everything; but she was not the sort of person you could depend on for evidence. Too free a fancy—I suppose that was it. She afterwards published a work of fiction in which she was understood to have given a representation—something in the nature of a caricature, as you might say—of my unworthy self. I didn’t read it, but Ralph just handed me the book with the principal passages marked. It was understood to be a description of my conversation; American peculiarities, nasal twang, Yankee notions, stars and stripes. Well, it was not at all accurate; she couldn’t have listened very attentively. I had no objection to her giving a report of my conversation, if she liked; but I didn’t like the idea that she hadn’t taken the trouble to listen to it. Of course I talk like an American—I can’t talk like a Hottentot.* However I talk, I’ve made them understand me pretty well over here. But I don’t talk like the old gentleman in that lady’s novel. He wasn’t an American; we wouldn’t have him over there at any price. I just mention that fact to show you that they’re not always accurate. Of course, as I’ve no daughters, and as Mrs Touchett resides in Florence, I haven’t had much chance to notice about the young ladies. It sometimes appears as if the young women in the lower class were not very well treated; but I guess their position is better in the upper and even to some extent in the middle.’

‘Gracious,’ Isabel exclaimed; ‘how many classes have they? About fifty, I suppose.’

‘Well, I don’t know that I ever counted them. I never took much notice of the classes. That’s the advantage of being an American here; you don’t belong to any class.’

‘I hope so,’ said Isabel. ‘Imagine one’s belonging to an English class!’

‘Well, I guess some of them are pretty comfortable—especially towards the top. But for me there are only two classes: the people I trust and the people I don’t. Of those two, my dear Isabel, you belong to the first.’

‘I’m much obliged to you,’ said the girl quickly. Her way of taking compliments seemed sometimes rather dry; she got rid of them as rapidly as possible. But as regards this she was sometimes misjudged; she was thought insensible to them, whereas in fact she was simply unwilling to show how infinitely they pleased her. To show that was to show too much. ‘I’m sure the English are very conventional,’ she added.

‘They’ve got everything pretty well fixed,’ Mr Touchett admitted. ‘It’s all settled beforehand—they don’t leave it to the last moment.’

‘I don’t like to have everything settled beforehand,’ said the girl. ‘I like more unexpectedness.’

Her uncle seemed amused at her distinctness of preference. ‘Well, it’s settled beforehand that you’ll have great success,’ he rejoined. ‘I suppose you’ll like that.’

‘I shall not have success if they’re too stupidly conventional. I’m not in the least stupidly conventional. I’m just the contrary. That’s what they won’t like.’

‘No, no, you’re all wrong,’ said the old man. ‘You can’t tell what they’ll like. They’re very inconsistent; that’s their principal interest.’

‘Ah well,’ said Isabel, standing before her uncle with her hands clasped about the belt of her black dress and looking up and down the lawn—‘that will suit me perfectly!’

VII

THE two amused themselves, time and again, with talking of the attitude of the British public as if the young lady had been in a position to appeal to it; but in fact the British public remained for the present profoundly indifferent to Miss Isabel Archer, whose fortune had dropped her, as her cousin said, into the dullest house in England. Her gouty uncle received very little company, and Mrs Touchett, not having cultivated relations with her husband's neighbours, was not warranted in expecting visits from them. She had, however, a peculiar taste; she liked to receive cards. For what is usually called social intercourse she had very little relish; but nothing pleased her more than to find her hall-table whitened with oblong morsels of symbolic pasteboard. She flattered herself that she was a very just woman, and had mastered the sovereign truth that nothing in this world is got for nothing. She had played no social part as mistress of Gardencourt, and it was not to be supposed that, in the surrounding country, a minute account should be kept of her comings and goings. But it is by no means certain that she did not feel it to be wrong that so little notice was taken of them and that her failure (really very gratuitous) to make herself important in the neighbourhood had not much to do with the acrimony of her allusions to her husband's adopted country. Isabel presently found herself in the singular situation of defending the British constitution against her aunt; Mrs Touchett having formed the habit of sticking pins into this venerable instrument. Isabel always felt an impulse to pull out the pins; not that she imagined they inflicted any damage on the tough old parchment, but because it seemed to her her aunt might make better use of her sharpness. She was very critical herself—it was incidental to her age, her sex and her nationality; but she was very sentimental as well, and there was something in Mrs Touchett's dryness that set her own moral fountains flowing.

'Now what's your point of view?' she asked of her aunt. 'When you criticise everything here you should have a point of view. Yours doesn't seem to be American—you thought everything over there so disagreeable. When I criticise I have mine; it's thoroughly American!'

'My dear young lady,' said Mrs Touchett, 'there are as many points of view in the world as there are people of sense to take them. You may say that doesn't make them very numerous! American? Never in the world; that's shockingly narrow. My point of view, thank God, is personal!'

Isabel thought this a better answer than she admitted; it was a tolerable description of her own manner of judging, but it would not have sounded well for her to say so. On the lips of a person less advanced in life and less enlightened by experience than Mrs Touchett such a declaration would savour of immodesty, even of arrogance. She risked it nevertheless in talking with Ralph, with whom she talked a great deal and with whom her conversation was of a sort that gave a large licence to extravagance. Her cousin used, as the phrase is, to chaff her; he very soon established with her a reputation for treating everything as a joke, and he was not a man to neglect the privileges such a reputation conferred. She accused him of an odious want of seriousness, of laughing at all things, beginning with himself. Such slender faculty of reverence as he possessed centred wholly upon his father; for the rest, he exercised his wit indifferently upon his father's son, this gentleman's weak lungs, his useless life, his fantastic mother, his friends (Lord Warburton in especial), his adopted, and his native country, his charming new-found cousin. 'I keep a band of music in my ante-room,' he said once to her. 'It has orders to play without stopping; it renders me two excellent services. It keeps the sounds of the world from reaching the private apartments, and it makes the world think that dancing's going on within.' It was dance-music indeed that you usually heard when you came within ear-shot of Ralph's band; the liveliest waltzes seemed to float upon the air. Isabel often found herself irritated by this perpetual fiddling; she would have liked to pass through the ante-room, as her cousin called it, and enter the private apartments. It mattered little that he had assured her they were a very dismal place; she would have been glad to undertake to sweep them and set them in order. It was but half-hospitality to let her remain outside; to punish him for which Isabel administered innumerable taps with the ferule of her straight young wit. It must be said that her wit was exercised to a large extent in self-defence, for her cousin amused himself with calling her 'Columbia'* and accusing her of a patriotism so heated that it scorched. He drew a caricature of her in which she was represented as a very pretty young woman dressed, on the lines of the prevailing fashion, in the folds of the national banner. Isabel's chief dread in life at this period of her development was that she should appear narrow-minded; what she feared next afterwards was that she should really be so. But she nevertheless made no scruple of abounding in her cousin's sense and pretending to sigh for the charms of

her native land. She would be as American as it pleased him to regard her, and if he chose to laugh at her she would give him plenty of occupation. She defended England against his mother, but when Ralph sang its praises on purpose, as she said, to work her up, she found herself able to differ from him on a variety of points. In fact, the quality of this small ripe country seemed as sweet to her as the taste of an October pear; and her satisfaction was at the root of the good spirits which enabled her to take her cousin's chaff and return it in kind. If her good-humour flagged at moments it was not because she thought herself ill-used, but because she suddenly felt sorry for Ralph. It seemed to her he was talking as a blind and had little heart in what he said.

'I don't know what's the matter with you,' she observed to him once; 'but I suspect you're a great humbug.'

'That's your privilege,' Ralph answered, who had not been used to being so crudely addressed.

'I don't know what you care for; I don't think you care for anything. You don't really care for England when you praise it; you don't care for America even when you pretend to abuse it.'

'I care for nothing but you, dear cousin,' said Ralph.

'If I could believe even that, I should be very glad.'

'Ah well, I should hope so!' the young man exclaimed.

Isabel might have believed it and not have been far from the truth. He thought a great deal about her; she was constantly present to his mind. At a time when his thoughts had been a good deal of a burden to him her sudden arrival, which promised nothing and was an openhanded gift of fate, had refreshed and quickened them, given them wings and something to fly for. Poor Ralph had been for many weeks steeped in melancholy; his outlook, habitually sombre, lay under the shadow of a deeper cloud. He had grown anxious about his father, whose gout, hitherto confined to his legs, had begun to ascend into regions more vital. The old man had been gravely ill in the spring, and the doctors had whispered to Ralph that another attack would be less easy to deal with. Just now he appeared disburdened of pain, but Ralph could not rid himself of a suspicion that this was a subterfuge of the enemy, who was waiting to take him off his guard. If the manœuvre should succeed there would be little hope of any great resistance. Ralph had always taken for granted that his father would survive him—that his own name would be the first grimly called. The father and son had been close companions, and the idea of being left alone with the remnant of a tasteless life on his hands was not gratifying to the young man, who had always and tacitly counted upon his elder's help in making the best of a poor business. At the prospect of losing his great motive Ralph lost indeed his one inspiration. If they might die at the same time it would be all very well; but without the encouragement of his father's society he should barely have patience to await his own turn. He had not the incentive of feeling that he was indispensable to his mother; it was a rule with his mother to have no regrets. He bethought himself of course that it had been a small kindness to his father to wish that, of the two, the active rather than the passive party should know the felt wound; he remembered that the old man had always treated his own forecast of an early end as a clever fallacy, which he should be delighted to discredit so far as he might by dying first. But of the two triumphs, that of refuting a sophistical son and that of holding on a while longer to a state of being which, with all abatements, he enjoyed, Ralph deemed it no sin to hope the latter might be vouchsafed to Mr Touchett.

These were nice questions, but Isabel's arrival put a stop to his puzzling over them. It even suggested there might be a compensation for the intolerable ennui of surviving his genial sire. He wondered whether he were harbouring 'love' for this spontaneous young woman from Albany; but he judged that on the whole he was not. After he had known her for a week he quite made up his mind to this, and every day he felt a little more sure. Lord Warburton had been right about her; she was a really interesting little figure. Ralph wondered how their neighbour had found it out so soon; and then he said it was only another proof of his friend's high abilities, which he had always greatly admired. If his cousin were to be nothing more than an entertainment to him, Ralph was conscious she was an entertainment of a high order. 'A character like that,' he said to himself—'a real little passionate force to see at play is the finest thing in nature.

It's finer than the finest work of art—than a Greek bas-relief, than a great Titian,* than a Gothic cathedral. It's very pleasant to be so well treated where one had least looked for it. I had never been more blue, more bored, than for a week before she came; I had never expected less that anything pleasant would happen. Suddenly I receive a Titian, by the post, to hang on my wall—a Greek bas-relief to stick over my chimney-piece. The key of a beautiful edifice is thrust into my hand, and I'm told to walk in and admire. My poor boy, you've been sadly ungrateful, and now you had better keep very quiet and never grumble again.' The sentiment of these reflexions was very just; but it was not exactly true that Ralph Touchett had had a key put into his hand. His cousin was a very brilliant girl, who would take, as he said,

a good deal of knowing; but she needed the knowing, and his attitude with regard to her, though it was contemplative and critical, was not judicial. He surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in at the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof. The door was fastened, and though he had keys in his pocket he had a conviction that none of them would fit. She was intelligent and generous; it was a fine free nature; but what was she going to do with herself? This question was irregular, for with most women one had no occasion to ask it. Most women did with themselves nothing at all; they waited, in attitudes more or less gracefully passive, for a man to come that way and furnish them with a destiny. Isabel's originality was that she gave one an impression of having intentions of her own. 'Whenever she executes them,' said Ralph, 'may I be there to see!'

It devolved upon him of course to do the honours of the place. Mr Touchett was confined to his chair, and his wife's position was that of rather a grim visitor; so that in the line of conduct that opened itself to Ralph duty and inclination were harmoniously mixed. He was not a great walker, but he strolled about the grounds with his cousin—a pastime for which the weather remained favourable with a persistency not allowed for in Isabel's somewhat lugubrious prevision of the climate; and in the long afternoons, of which the length was but the measure of her gratified eagerness, they took a boat on the river, the dear little river, as Isabel called it, where the opposite shore seemed still a part of the foreground of the landscape; or drove over the country in a phaeton*—a low, capacious, thick-wheeled phaeton formerly much used by Mr Touchett, but which he had now ceased to enjoy. Isabel enjoyed it largely and, handling the reins in a manner which approved itself to the groom as 'knowing,' was never weary of driving her uncle's capital horses through winding lanes and byways full of the rural incidents she had confidently expected to find; past cottages thatched and timbered, past ale-houses latticed and sanded, past patches of ancient common and glimpses of empty parks, between hedgerows made thick by midsummer. When they reached home they usually found tea had been served on the lawn and that Mrs Touchett had not shrunk from the extremity of handing her husband his cup. But the two for the most part sat silent; the old man with his head back and his eyes closed, his wife occupied with her knitting and wearing that appearance of rare profundity with which some ladies consider the movement of their needles.

One day, however, a visitor had arrived. The two young persons, after spending an hour on the river, strolled back to the house and perceived Lord Warburton sitting under the trees and engaged in conversation, of which even at a distance the desultory character was appreciable, with Mrs Touchett. He had driven over from his own place with a portmanteau and had asked, as the father and son often invited him to do, for a dinner and a lodging. Isabel, seeing him for half an hour on the day of her arrival, had discovered in this brief space that she liked him; he had indeed rather sharply registered himself on her fine sense and she had thought of him several times. She had hoped she should see him again—hoped too that she should see a few others. Gardencourt was not dull; the place itself was sovereign, her uncle was more and more a sort of golden grandfather, and Ralph was unlike any cousin she had ever encountered—her idea of cousins having tended to gloom. Then her impressions were still so fresh and so quickly renewed that there was as yet hardly a hint of vacancy in the view. But Isabel had need to remind herself that she was interested in human nature and that her foremost hope in coming abroad had been that she should see a great many people. When Ralph said to her, as he had done several times, 'I wonder you find this endurable; you ought to see some of the neighbours and some of our friends, because we have really got a few, though you would never suppose it'—when he offered to invite what he called a 'lot of people' and make her acquainted with English society, she encouraged the hospitable impulse and promised in advance to hurl herself into the fray. Little, however, for the present, had come of his offers, and it may be confided to the reader that if the young man delayed to carry them out it was because he found the labour of providing for his companion by no means so severe as to require extraneous help. Isabel had spoken to him very often about 'specimens;' it was a word that played a considerable part in her vocabulary; she had given him to understand that she wished to see English society illustrated by eminent cases.

'Well now, there's a specimen,' he said to her as they walked up from the riverside and he recognised Lord Warburton.

'A specimen of what?' asked the girl.

'A specimen of an English gentleman.'

'Do you mean they're all like him?'

'Oh no; they're not all like him.'

'He's a favourable specimen then,' said Isabel; 'because I'm sure he's nice.'

‘Yes, he’s very nice. And he’s very fortunate.’

The fortunate Lord Warburton exchanged a hand-shake with our heroine and hoped she was very well. ‘But I needn’t ask that,’ he said, ‘since you’ve been handling the oars.’

‘I’ve been rowing a little,’ Isabel answered; ‘but how should you know it?’

‘Oh, I know *he* doesn’t row; he’s too lazy,’ said his lordship, indicating Ralph Touchett with a laugh.

‘He has a good excuse for his laziness,’ Isabel rejoined, lowering her voice a little.

‘Ah, he has a good excuse for everything!’ cried Lord Warburton, still with his sonorous mirth.

‘My excuse for not rowing is that my cousin rows so well,’ said Ralph. ‘She does everything well. She touches nothing that she doesn’t adorn!’

‘It makes one want to be touched, Miss Archer,’ Lord Warburton declared.

‘Be touched in the right sense and you’ll never look the worse for it,’ said Isabel, who, if it pleased her to hear it said that her accomplishments were numerous, was happily able to reflect that such complacency was not the indication of a feeble mind, inasmuch as there were several things in which she excelled. Her desire to think well of herself had at least the element of humility that it always needed to be supported by proof.

Lord Warburton not only spent the night at Gardencourt, but he was persuaded to remain over the second day; and when the second day was ended he determined to postpone his departure till the morrow. During this period he addressed many of his remarks to Isabel, who accepted this evidence of his esteem with a very good grace. She found herself liking him extremely; the first impression he had made on her had had weight, but at the end of an evening spent in his society she scarce fell short of seeing him—though quite without luridity—as a hero of romance.* She retired to rest with a sense of good fortune, with a quickened consciousness of possible felicities. ‘It’s very nice to know two such charming people as those,’ she said, meaning by ‘those’ her cousin and her cousin’s friend. It must be added moreover that an incident had occurred which might have seemed to put her good-humour to the test. Mr Touchett went to bed at half-past nine o’clock, but his wife remained in the drawing-room with the other members of the party. She prolonged her vigil for something less than an hour, and then, rising, observed to Isabel that it was time they should bid the gentlemen good-night. Isabel had as yet no desire to go to bed; the occasion wore, to her sense, a festive character, and feasts were not in the habit of terminating so early. So, without further thought, she replied, very simply—

‘Need I go, dear aunt? I’ll come up in half an hour.’

‘It’s impossible I should wait for you,’ Mrs Touchett answered.

‘Ah, you needn’t wait! Ralph will light my candle,’ Isabel gaily engaged.

‘I’ll light your candle; do let me light your candle, Miss Archer!’ Lord Warburton exclaimed. ‘Only I beg it shall not be before midnight.’

Mrs Touchett fixed her bright little eyes upon him a moment and transferred them coldly to her niece. ‘You can’t stay alone with the gentlemen. You’re not—you’re not at your blest Albany, my dear.’

Isabel rose, blushing. ‘I wish I were,’ she said.

‘Oh, I say, mother!’ Ralph broke out.

‘My dear Mrs Touchett!’ Lord Warburton murmured.

‘I didn’t make your country, my lord,’ Mrs Touchett said majestically. ‘I must take it as I find it.’

‘Can’t I stay with my own cousin?’ Isabel enquired.

‘I’m not aware that Lord Warburton is your cousin.’

‘Perhaps I had better go to bed!’ the visitor suggested. ‘That will arrange it.’

Mrs Touchett gave a little look of despair and sat down again. ‘Oh, if it’s necessary I’ll stay up till midnight.’

Ralph meanwhile handed Isabel her candlestick. He had been watching her; it had seemed to him her temper was involved—an accident that might be interesting. But if he had expected anything of a flare he was disappointed, for the girl simply laughed a little, nodded good-night and withdrew accompanied by her aunt. For himself he was annoyed at his mother, though he thought she was right. Above-stairs the two ladies separated at Mrs Touchett’s door. Isabel had said nothing on her way up.

‘Of course you’re vexed at my interfering with you,’ said Mrs Touchett.

Isabel considered. ‘I’m not vexed, but I’m surprised—and a good deal mystified. Wasn’t it proper I should remain in the drawingroom?’

‘Not in the least. Young girls here—in decent houses—don’t sit alone with the gentlemen late at

night.'

'You were very right to tell me then,' said Isabel. 'I don't understand it, but I'm very glad to know it.'

'I shall always tell you,' her aunt answered, 'whenever I see you taking what seems to me too much liberty.'

'Pray do; but I don't say I shall always think your remonstrance just.'

'Very likely not. You're too fond of your own ways.'

'Yes, I think I'm very fond of them. But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do.'

'So as to do them?' asked her aunt.

'So as to choose,' said Isabel.

VIII

As she was devoted to romantic effects Lord Warburton ventured to express a hope that she would come some day and see his house, a very curious old place. He extracted from Mrs Touchett a promise that she bring her niece to Lockleigh, and Ralph signified his willingness to attend the ladies if his father should be able to spare him. Lord Warburton assured our heroine that in the mean time his sisters would come and see her. She knew something about his sisters, having sounded him, during the hours they spent together while he was at Gardencourt, on many points connected with his family. When Isabel was interested she asked a great many questions, and as her companion was a copious talker she urged him on this occasion by no means in vain. He told her he had four sisters and two brothers and had lost both his parents. The brothers and sisters were very good people—'not particularly clever, you know,' he said, 'but very decent and pleasant'; and he was so good as to hope Miss Archer might know them well. One of the brothers was in the Church, settled in the family living, that of Lockleigh, which was a heavy, sprawling parish, and was an excellent fellow in spite of his thinking differently from himself on every conceivable topic. And then Lord Warburton mentioned some of the opinions held by his brother, which were opinions Isabel had often heard expressed and that she supposed to be entertained by a considerable portion of the human family. Many of them indeed she supposed she had held herself, till he assured her she was quite mistaken, that it was really impossible, that she had doubtless imagined she entertained them, but that she might depend that, if she thought them over a little, she would find there was nothing in them. When she answered that she had already thought several of the questions involved over very attentively he declared that she was only another example of what he had often been struck with—the fact that, of all the people in the world, the Americans were the most grossly superstitious. They were rank Tories and bigots, every one of them; there were no conservatives like American conservatives. Her uncle and her cousin were there to prove it; nothing could be more mediæval than many of their views; they had ideas that people in England nowadays were ashamed to confess to; and they had the impudence moreover, said his lordship, laughing, to pretend they knew more about the needs and dangers of this poor dear stupid old England than he who was born in it and owned a considerable slice of it—the more shame to him! From all of which Isabel gathered that Lord Warburton was a nobleman of the newest pattern, a reformer, a radical, a contemner of ancient ways. His other brother, who was in the army in India, was rather wild and pig-headed and had not been of much use as yet but to make debts for Warburton to pay—one of the most precious privileges of an elder brother. 'I don't think I shall pay any more,' said her friend; 'he lives a monstrous deal better than I do, enjoys unheard-of luxuries and thinks himself a much finer gentleman than I. As I'm a consistent radical I go in only for equality; I don't go in for the superiority of the younger brothers.' Two of his four sisters, the second and fourth, were married, one of them having done very well, as they said, the other only so-so. The husband of the elder, Lord Haycock, was a very good fellow, but unfortunately a horrid Tory; and his wife, like all good English wives, was worse than her husband. The other had espoused a smallish squire in Norfolk and, though married but the other day, had already five children. This information and much more Lord Warburton imparted to his young American listener, taking pains to make many things clear and to lay bare to her apprehension the peculiarities of English life. Isabel was often amused at his explicitness and at the small allowance he seemed to make either for her own experience or for her imagination. 'He thinks I'm a barbarian,' she said, 'and that I've never seen forks and spoons;' and she used to ask him artless questions for the pleasure of hearing him answer seriously. Then when he had fallen into the trap, 'It's a pity you can't see me in my war-paint and feathers,' she remarked; 'if I had known how kind you are to the poor savages I would have brought over my native costume!' Lord Warburton had travelled through the United States and knew much more about them than Isabel; he was so good as to say that America was the most charming country in the world, but his recollections of it appeared to encourage the idea that Americans in England would need to have a great many things explained to them. 'If I had only had you to explain things to me in America!' he said. 'I was rather puzzled in your country; in fact I was quite bewildered, and the trouble was that the explanations only puzzled me more. You know I think they often gave me the wrong ones on purpose; they're rather clever about that over there. But when I explain you can trust me; about what I tell you there's no mistake.' There was no mistake at least about his being very intelligent and cultivated and knowing almost everything in the world. Although he gave the most interesting and thrilling glimpses Isabel felt he never did it to exhibit himself, and though he had had rare chances and had tumbled in, as she put it, for high prizes, he was as far as possible from making a merit

of it. He had enjoyed the best things of life, but they had not spoiled his sense of proportion. His quality was a mixture of the effect of rich experience—oh, so easily come by!—with a modesty at times almost boyish; the sweet and wholesome savour of which—it was as agreeable as something tasted—lost nothing from the addition of a tone of responsible kindness.

'I like your specimen English gentleman very much,' Isabel said to Ralph after Lord Warburton had gone.

'I like him too—I love him well,' Ralph returned. 'But I pity him more.'

Isabel looked at him askance. 'Why, that seems to me his only fault—that one can't pity him a little. He appears to have everything, to know everything, to *be* everything.'

'Oh, he's in a bad way!' Ralph insisted.

'I suppose you don't mean in health?'

'No, as to that he's detestably sound. What I mean is that he's a man with a great position who's playing all sorts of tricks with it. He doesn't take himself seriously.'

'Does he regard himself as a joke?'

'Much worse; he regards himself as an imposition—as an abuse.'

'Well, perhaps he is,' said Isabel.

'Perhaps he is—though on the whole I don't think so. But in that case what's more pitiable than a sentient, self-conscious abuse planted by other hands, deeply rooted but aching with a sense of its injustice? For me, in his place, I could be as solemn as a statue of Buddha. He occupies a position that appeals to my imagination. Great responsibilities, great opportunities, great consideration, great wealth, great power, a natural share in the public affairs of a great country. But he's all in a muddle about himself, his position, his power, and indeed about everything in the world. He's the victim of a critical age; he has ceased to believe in himself and he doesn't know what to believe in. When I attempt to tell him (because if I were he I know very well what I should believe in) he calls me a pampered bigot. I believe he seriously thinks me an awful Philistine; he says I don't understand my time. I understand it certainly better than he, who can neither abolish himself as a nuisance nor maintain himself as an institution.'

'He doesn't look very wretched,' Isabel observed.

'Possibly not; though, being a man of a good deal of charming taste, I think he often has uncomfortable hours. But what is it to say of a being of his opportunities that he's not miserable? Besides, I believe he is.'

'I don't,' said Isabel.

'Well,' her cousin rejoined, 'if he isn't he ought to be!'

In the afternoon she spent an hour with her uncle on the lawn, where the old man sat, as usual, with his shawl over his legs and his large cup of diluted tea in his hands. In the course of conversation he asked her what she thought of their late visitor.

Isabel was prompt. 'I think he's charming.'

'He's a nice person,' said Mr Touchett, 'but I don't recommend you to fall in love with him.'

'I shall not do it then; I shall never fall in love but on your recommendation. Moreover,' Isabel added, 'my cousin gives me rather a sad account of Lord Warburton.'

'Oh, indeed? I don't know what there may be to say, but you must remember that Ralph *must* talk.'

'He thinks your friend's too subversive—or not subversive enough! I don't quite understand which,' said Isabel.

The old man shook his head slowly, smiled and put down his cup. 'I don't know which either. He goes very far, but it's quite possible he doesn't go far enough. He seems to want to do away with a good many things, but he seems to want to remain himself. I suppose that's natural, but it's rather inconsistent.'

'Oh, I hope he'll remain himself,' said Isabel. 'If he were to be done away with his friends would miss him sadly.'

'Well,' said the old man, 'I guess he'll stay and amuse his friends. I should certainly miss him very much here at Gardencourt. He always amuses me when he comes over, and I think he amuses himself as well. There's a considerable number like him, round in society; they're very fashionable just now. I don't know what they're trying to do—whether they're trying to get up a revolution. I hope at any rate they'll put it off till after I'm gone. You see they want to disestablish everything; but I'm a pretty big landowner here, and I don't want to be disestablished. I wouldn't have come over if I had thought they were going to

behave like that,' Mr Touchett went on with expanding hilarity. 'I came over because I thought England was a safe country. I call it a regular fraud if they are going to introduce any considerable changes; there'll be a large number disappointed in that case.'

'Oh, I do hope they'll make a revolution!' Isabel exclaimed. 'I should delight in seeing a revolution.'

'Let me see,' said her uncle, with a humorous intention; 'I forget whether you're on the side of the old or on the side of the new. I've heard you take such opposite views.'

'I'm on the side of both. I guess I'm a little on the side of everything. In a revolution—after it was well begun—I think I should be a high, proud loyalist. One sympathises more with them, and they've a chance to behave so exquisitely. I mean so picturesquely.'

'I don't know that I understand what you mean by behaving picturesquely, but it seems to me that you do that always, my dear.'

'Oh, you lovely man, if I could believe that!' the girl interrupted.

'I'm afraid, after all, you won't have the pleasure of going gracefully to the guillotine here just now,' Mr Touchett went on. 'If you want to see a big outbreak you must pay us a long visit. You see, when you come to the point it wouldn't suit them to be taken at their word.'

'Of whom are you speaking?'

'Well, I mean Lord Warburton and his friends—the radicals of the upper class. Of course I only know the way it strikes me. They talk about the changes, but I don't think they quite realise. You and I, you know, we know what it is to have lived under democratic institutions: I always thought them very comfortable, but I was used to them from the first. And then I ain't a lord; you're a lady, my dear, but I ain't a lord. Now over here I don't think it quite comes home to them. It's a matter of every day and every hour, and I don't think many of them would find it as pleasant as what they've got. Of course if they want to try, it's their own business; but I expect they won't try very hard.'

'Don't you think they're sincere?' Isabel asked.

'Well, they want to *feel* earnest,' Mr Touchett allowed; 'but it seems as if they took it out in theories mostly. Their radical views are a kind of amusement; they've got to have some amusement, and they might have coarser tastes than that. You see they're very luxurious, and these progressive ideas are about their biggest luxury. They make them feel moral and yet don't damage their position. They think a great deal of their position; don't let one of them ever persuade you he doesn't, for if you were to proceed on that basis you'd be pulled up very short.'

Isabel followed her uncle's argument, which he unfolded with his quaint distinctness, most attentively, and though she was unacquainted with the British aristocracy she found it in harmony with her general impressions of human nature. But she felt moved to put in a protest on Lord Warburton's behalf. 'I don't believe Lord Warburton's a humbug; I don't care what the others are. I should like to see Lord Warburton put to the test.'

'Heaven deliver me from my friends!' Mr Touchett answered. 'Lord Warburton's a very amiable young man—a very fine young man. He has a hundred thousand a year. He owns fifty thousand acres of the soil of this little island and ever so many other things besides. He has half a dozen houses to live in. He has a seat in Parliament as I have one at my own dinner-table. He has elegant tastes—cares for literature, for art, for science, for charming young ladies. The most elegant is his taste for the new views. It affords him a great deal of pleasure—more perhaps than anything else, except the young ladies. His old house over there—what does he call it, Lockleigh?—is very attractive; but I don't think it's as pleasant as this. That doesn't matter, however—he has so many others. His views don't hurt any one as far as I can see; they certainly don't hurt himself. And if there were to be a revolution he would come off very easily. They wouldn't touch him, they'd leave him as he is: he's too much liked.'

'Ah, he couldn't be a martyr even if he wished!' Isabel sighed. 'That's a very poor position.'

'He'll never be a martyr unless you make him one,' said the old man.

Isabel shook her head; there might have been something laughable in the fact that she did it with a touch of melancholy. 'I shall never make any one a martyr.'

'You'll never be one, I hope.'

'I hope not. But you don't pity Lord Warburton then as Ralph does?'

Her uncle looked at her a while with genial acuteness. 'Yes, I do, after all!'

IX

THE two Misses Molyneux, this nobleman's sisters, came presently to call upon her, and Isabel took a fancy to the young ladies, who appeared to her to show a most original stamp. It is true that when she described them to her cousin by that term he declared that no epithet could be less applicable than this to the two Misses Molyneux, since there were fifty thousand young women in England who exactly resembled them. Deprived of this advantage, however, Isabel's visitors retained that of an extreme sweetness and shyness of demeanour, and of having, as she thought, eyes like the balanced basins, the circles of 'ornamental water,' set, in parterres, among the geraniums.

'They're not morbid, at any rate, whatever they are,' our heroine said to herself; and she deemed this a great charm, for two or three of the friends of her girlhood had been regrettably open to the charge (they would have been so nice without it), to say nothing of Isabel's having occasionally suspected it as a tendency of her own. The Misses Molyneux were not in their first youth, but they had bright, fresh complexions and something of the smile of childhood. Yes, their eyes, which Isabel admired, were round, quiet and contented, and their figures, also of a generous roundness, were encased in sealskin jackets. Their friendliness was great, so great that they were almost embarrassed to show it; they seemed somewhat afraid of the young lady from the other side of the world and rather looked than spoke their good wishes. But they made it clear to her that they hoped she would come to luncheon at Lockleigh, where they lived with their brother, and then they might see her very, very often. They wondered if she wouldn't come over some day and sleep: they were expecting some people on the twenty-ninth, so perhaps she would come while the people were there.

'I'm afraid it isn't any one very remarkable,' said the elder sister; 'but I dare say you'll take us as you find us.'

'I shall find you delightful; I think you're enchanting just as you are,' replied Isabel, who often praised profusely.

Her visitors flushed, and her cousin told her, after they were gone, that if she said such things to those poor girls they would think she was in some wild, free manner practising on them: he was sure it was the first time they had been called enchanting.

'I can't help it,' Isabel answered. 'I think it's lovely to be so quiet and reasonable and satisfied. I should like to be like that.'

'Heaven forbid!' cried Ralph with ardour.

'I mean to try and imitate them,' said Isabel. 'I want very much to see them at home.'

She had this pleasure a few days later, when, with Ralph and his mother, she drove over to Lockleigh. She found the Misses Molyneux sitting in a vast drawing-room (she perceived afterwards it was one of several) in a wilderness of faded chintz; they were dressed on this occasion in black velveteen. Isabel liked them even better at home than she had done at Gardencourt, and was more than ever struck with the fact that they were not morbid. It had seemed to her before that if they had a fault it was a want of play of mind; but she presently saw they were capable of deep emotion. Before luncheon she was alone with them for some time, on one side of the room, while Lord Warburton, at a distance, talked to Mrs Touchett.

'Is it true your brother's such a great radical?' Isabel asked. She knew it was true, but we have seen that her interest in human nature was keen, and she had a desire to draw the Misses Molyneux out.

'Oh dear, yes; he's immensely advanced,' said Mildred, the younger sister.

'At the same time Warburton's very reasonable,' Miss Molyneux observed.

Isabel watched him a moment at the other side of the room; he was clearly trying hard to make himself agreeable to Mrs Touchett. Ralph had met the frank advances of one of the dogs before the fire that the temperature of an English August, in the ancient expanses, had not made an impertinence. 'Do you suppose your brother's sincere?' Isabel enquired with a smile.

'Oh, he must be, you know!' Mildred exclaimed quickly, while the elder sister gazed at our heroine in silence.

'Do you think he would stand the test?'

'The test?'

‘I mean for instance having to give up all this.’

‘Having to give up Lockleigh?’ said Miss Molyneux, finding her voice.

‘Yes, and the other places; what are they called?’

The two sisters exchanged an almost frightened glance. ‘Do you mean—do you mean on account of the expense?’ the younger one asked.

‘I dare say he might let one or two of his houses,’ said the other.

‘Let them for nothing?’ Isabel demanded.

‘I can’t fancy his giving up his property,’ said Miss Molyneux.

‘Ah, I’m afraid he is an impostor!’ Isabel returned. ‘Don’t you think it’s a false position?’

Her companions, evidently, had lost themselves. ‘My brother’s position?’ Miss Molyneux enquired.

‘It’s thought a very good position,’ said the younger sister. ‘It’s the first position in this part of the county.’

‘I dare say you think me very irreverent,’ Isabel took occasion to remark. ‘I suppose you revere your brother and are rather afraid of him.’

‘Of course one looks up to one’s brother,’ said Miss Molyneux simply.

‘If you do that he must be very good—because you, evidently, are beautifully good.’

‘He’s most kind. It will never be known, the good he does.’

‘His ability is known,’ Mildred added; ‘every one thinks it’s immense.’

‘Oh, I can see that,’ said Isabel. ‘But if I were he I should wish to fight to the death: I mean for the heritage of the past. I should hold it tight.’

‘I think one ought to be liberal,’ Mildred argued gently. ‘We’ve always been so, even from the earliest times.’

‘Ah well,’ said Isabel, ‘you’ve made a great success of it; I don’t wonder you like it. I see you’re very fond of crewels.’

When Lord Warburton showed her the house, after luncheon, it seemed to her a matter of course that it should be a noble picture. Within, it had been a good deal modernised—some of its best points had lost their purity; but as they saw it from the gardens, a stout grey pile, of the softest, deepest, most weather-fretted hue, rising from a broad, still moat, it affected the young visitor as a castle in a legend. The day was cool and rather lustreless; the first note of autumn had been struck, and the watery sunshine rested on the walls in blurred and desultory gleams, washing them, as it were, in places tenderly chosen, where the ache of antiquity was keenest. Her host’s brother, the Vicar, had come to luncheon, and Isabel had had five minutes’ talk with him—time enough to institute a search for a rich ecclesiasticism and give it up as vain. The marks of the Vicar of Lockleigh were a big, athletic figure, a candid, natural countenance, a capacious appetite and a tendency to indiscriminate laughter. Isabel learned afterwards from her cousin that before taking orders he had been a mighty wrestler and that he was still, on occasion—in the privacy of the family circle as it were—quite capable of flooring his man. Isabel liked him—she was in the mood for liking everything; but her imagination was a good deal taxed to think of him as a source of spiritual aid. The whole party, on leaving lunch, went to walk in the grounds; but Lord Warburton exercised some ingenuity in engaging his least familiar guest in a stroll apart from the others.

‘I wish you to see the place properly, seriously,’ he said. ‘You can’t do so if your attention is distracted by irrelevant gossip.’ His own conversation (though he told Isabel a good deal about the house, which had a very curious history) was not purely archæological; he reverted at intervals to matters more personal—matters personal to the young lady as well as to himself. But at last, after a pause of some duration, returning for a moment to their ostensible theme, ‘Ah, well,’ he said, ‘I’m very glad indeed you like the old barrack. I wish you could see more of it—that you could stay here a while. My sisters have taken an immense fancy to you—if that would be any inducement.’

‘There’s no want of inducements,’ Isabel answered; ‘but I’m afraid I can’t make engagements. I’m quite in my aunt’s hands.’

‘Ah, pardon me if I say I don’t exactly believe that. I’m pretty sure you can do whatever you want.’

‘I’m sorry if I make that impression on you; I don’t think it’s a nice impression to make.’

‘It has the merit of permitting me to hope.’ And Lord Warburton paused a moment.

‘To hope what?’

‘That in future I may see you often.’

‘Ah,’ said Isabel, ‘to enjoy that pleasure I needn’t be so terribly emancipated.’

‘Doubtless not; and yet, at the same time, I don’t think your uncle likes me.’

‘You’re very much mistaken. I’ve heard him speak very highly of you.’

‘I’m glad you have talked about me,’ said Lord Warburton. ‘But, I nevertheless don’t think he’d like me to keep coming to Gardencourt.’

‘I can’t answer for my uncle’s tastes,’ the girl rejoined, ‘though I ought as far as possible to take them into account. But for myself I shall be very glad to see you.’

‘Now that’s what I like to hear you say. I’m charmed when you say that.’

‘You’re easily charmed, my lord,’ said Isabel.

‘No, I’m not easily charmed!’ And then he stopped a moment. ‘But you’ve charmed me, Miss Archer.’

These words were uttered with an indefinable sound which startled the girl; it struck her as the prelude to something grave: she had heard the sound before and she recognised it. She had no wish, however, that for the moment such a prelude should have a sequel, and she said as gaily as possible and as quickly as an appreciable degree of agitation would allow her: ‘I’m afraid there’s no prospect of my being able to come here again.’

‘Never?’ said Lord Warburton.

‘I won’t say “never”; I should feel very melodramatic.’

‘May I come and see you then some day next week?’

‘Most assuredly. What is there to prevent it?’

‘Nothing tangible. But with you I never feel safe. I’ve a sort of sense that you’re always summing people up.’

‘You don’t of necessity lose by that.’

‘It’s very kind of you to say so; but, even if I gain, stern justice is not what I most love. Is Mrs Touchett going to take you abroad?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Is England not good enough for you?’

‘That’s a very Machiavellian speech; it doesn’t deserve an answer. I want to see as many countries as I can.’

‘Then you’ll go on judging, I suppose.’

‘Enjoying, I hope, too.’

‘Yes, that’s what you enjoy most; I can’t make out what you’re up to,’ said Lord Warburton. ‘You strike me as having mysterious purposes—vast designs.’

‘You’re so good as to have a theory about me which I don’t at all fill out. Is there anything mysterious in a purpose entertained and executed every year, in the most public manner, by fifty thousand of my fellow-countrymen—the purpose of improving one’s mind by foreign travel?’

‘You can’t improve your mind, Miss Archer,’ her companion declared. ‘It’s already a most formidable instrument. It looks down on us all; it despises us.’

‘Despises you? You’re making fun of me,’ said Isabel seriously.

‘Well, you think us “quaint”—that’s the same thing. I won’t be thought “quaint,” to begin with; I’m not so in the least. I protest.’

‘That protest is one of the quaintest things I’ve ever heard,’ Isabel answered with a smile.

Lord Warburton was briefly silent. ‘You judge only from the outside—you don’t care,’ he said presently. ‘You only care to amuse yourself.’ The note she had heard in his voice a moment before reappeared, and mixed with it now was an audible strain of bitterness—a bitterness so abrupt and inconsequent that the girl was afraid she had hurt him. She had often heard that the English are a highly eccentric people, and she had even read in some ingenious author that they are at bottom the most romantic of races. Was Lord Warburton suddenly turning romantic—was he going to make her a scene, in his own house, only the third time they had met? She was reassured quickly enough by her sense of his great good manners, which was not impaired by the fact that he had already touched the furthest limit of good taste in expressing his admiration of a young lady who had confided in his hospitality. She was right in trusting to his good manners, for he presently went on, laughing a little and without a trace of the accent that had discomposed her: ‘I don’t mean of course that you amuse yourself with trifles. You select great materials; the foibles, the afflictions of human nature, the peculiarities of nations!’

‘As regards that,’ said Isabel, ‘I should find in my own nation entertainment for a lifetime. But we’ve a long drive, and my aunt will soon wish to start.’ She turned back toward the others and Lord Warburton

walked beside her in silence. But before they reached the others, ‘I shall come and see you next week,’ he said.

She had received an appreciable shock, but as it died away she felt that she couldn’t pretend to herself that it was altogether a painful one. Nevertheless she made answer to his declaration, coldly enough, ‘Just as you please.’ And her coldness was not the calculation of her effect—a game she played in a much smaller degree than would have seemed probable to many critics. It came from a certain fear.

X

THE day after her visit to Lockleigh she received a note from her friend Miss Stackpole—a note of which the envelope, exhibiting in conjunction the postmark of Liverpool and the neat calligraphy of the quick-fingered Henrietta, caused her some liveliness of emotion. 'Here I am, my lovely friend,' Miss Stackpole wrote; 'I managed to get off at last. I decided only the night before I left New York—the *Interviewer* having come round to my figure. I put a few things into a bag, like a veteran journalist, and came down to the steamer in a street-car. Where are you and where can we meet? I suppose you're visiting at some castle or other and have already acquired the correct accent. Perhaps even you have married a lord; I almost hope you have, for I want some introductions to the first people and shall count on you for a few. The *Interviewer* wants some light on the nobility. My first impressions (of the people at large) are not rosecoloured; but I wish to talk them over with you, and you know that, whatever I am, at least I'm not superficial. I've also something very particular to tell you. Do appoint a meeting as quickly as you can; come to London (I should like so much to visit the sights with you) or else let me come to you, *wherever you are*. I will do so with pleasure; for you know everything interests me and I wish to see as much as possible of the inner life.'

Isabel judged best not to show this letter to her uncle; but she acquainted him with its purport, and, as she expected, he begged her instantly to assure Miss Stackpole, in his name, that he should be delighted to receive her at Gardencourt. 'Though she's a literary lady,' he said, 'I suppose that, being an American, she won't show me up, as that other one did. She has seen others like me.'

'She has seen no other so delightful!' Isabel answered; but she was not altogether at ease about Henrietta's reproductive instincts, which belonged to that side of her friend's character which she regarded with least complacency. She wrote to Miss Stackpole, however, that she would be very welcome under Mr Touchett's roof; and this alert young woman lost no time in announcing her prompt approach. She had gone up to London, and it was from that centre that she took the train for the station nearest to Gardencourt, where Isabel and Ralph were in waiting to receive her.

'Shall I love her or shall I hate her?' Ralph asked while they moved along the platform.

'Whichever you do will matter very little to her,' said Isabel. 'She doesn't care a straw what men think of her.'

'As a man I'm bound to dislike her then. She must be a kind of monster. Is she very ugly?'

'No, she's decidedly pretty.'

'A female interviewer—a reporter in petticoats? I'm very curious to see her,' Ralph conceded. 'It's very easy to laugh at her but it is not easy to be as brave as she.'

'I should think not; crimes of violence and attacks on the person require more or less pluck. Do you suppose she'll interview *me*?'

'Never in the world. She'll not think you of enough importance.'

'You'll see,' said Ralph. 'She'll send a description of us all, including Bunchie, to her newspaper.'

'I shall ask her not to,' Isabel answered.

'You think she's capable of it then?'

'Perfectly.'

'And yet you've made her your bosom-friend?'

'I've not made her my bosom-friend; but I like her in spite of her faults.'

'Ah well,' said Ralph, 'I'm afraid I shall dislike her in spite of her merits.'

'You'll probably fall in love with her at the end of three days.'

'And have my love-letters published in the *Interviewer*? Never!' cried the young man.

The train presently arrived, and Miss Stackpole, promptly descending, proved, as Isabel had promised, quite delicately, even though rather provincially, fair. She was a neat, plump person, of medium stature, with a round face, a small mouth, a delicate complexion, a bunch of light brown ringlets at the back of her head and a peculiarly open, surprised-looking eye. The most striking point in her appearance was the remarkable fixedness of this organ, which rested without impudence or defiance, but as if in conscientious exercise of a natural right, upon every object it happened to encounter. It rested in this

manner upon Ralph himself, a little arrested by Miss Stackpole's gracious and comfortable aspect, which hinted that it wouldn't be so easy as he had assumed to disapprove of her. She rustled, she shimmered, in fresh, dove-coloured draperies, and Ralph saw at a glance that she was as crisp and new and comprehensive as a first issue before the folding. From top to toe she had probably no misprint.* She spoke in a clear, high voice—a voice not rich but loud; yet after she had taken her place with her companions in Mr Touchett's carriage she struck him as not all in the large type, the type of horrid 'headings,' that he had expected. She answered the enquiries made of her by Isabel, however, and in which the young man ventured to join, with copious lucidity; and later, in the library at Gardencourt, when she had made the acquaintance of Mr Touchett (his wife not having thought it necessary to appear) did more to give the measure of her confidence in her powers. 'Well, I should like to know whether you consider yourselves American or English,' she broke out. 'If once I knew I could talk to you accordingly.'

'Talk to us anyhow and we shall be thankful,' Ralph liberally answered.

She fixed her eyes on him, and there was something in their character that reminded him of large polished buttons—buttons that might have fixed the elastic loops of some tense receptacle: he seemed to see the reflection of surrounding objects on the pupil. The expression of a button is not usually deemed human, but there was something in Miss Stackpole's gaze that made him, as a very modest man, feel vaguely embarrassed—less inviolate, more dishonoured, than he liked. This sensation, it must be added, after he had spent a day or two in her company, sensibly diminished, though it never wholly lapsed. 'I don't suppose that you're going to undertake to persuade me that *you're* an American,' she said.

'To please you I'll be an Englishman, I'll be a Turk!'

'Well, if you can change about that way you're very welcome,' Miss Stackpole returned.

'I'm sure you understand everything and that differences of nationality are no barrier to you,' Ralph went on.

Miss Stackpole gazed at him still. 'Do you mean the foreign languages?'

'The languages are nothing. I mean the spirit—the genius.'

'I'm not sure that I understand you,' said the correspondent of the *Interviewer*; 'but I expect I shall before I leave.'

'He's what's called a cosmopolite,' Isabel suggested.

'That means he's a little of everything and not much of any. I must say I think patriotism is like charity—it begins at home.'

'Ah, but where does home begin, Miss Stackpole?' Ralph enquired.

'I don't know where it begins, but I know where it ends. It ended a long time before I got here.'

'Don't you like it over here?' asked Mr Touchett with his aged, innocent voice.

'Well, sir, I haven't quite made up my mind what ground I shall take. I feel a good deal cramped. I felt it on the journey from Liverpool to London.'

'Perhaps you were in a crowded carriage,' Ralph suggested.

'Yes, but it was crowded with friends—a party of Americans whose acquaintance I had made upon the steamer; a lovely group from Little Rock, Arkansas. In spite of that I felt cramped—I felt something pressing upon me; I couldn't tell what it was. I felt at the very commencement as if I were not going to accord with the atmosphere. But I suppose I shall make my own atmosphere. That's the true way—then you can breathe. Your surroundings seem very attractive.'

'Ah, we too are a lovely group!' said Ralph. 'Wait a little and you'll see.'

Miss Stackpole showed every disposition to wait and evidently was prepared to make a considerable stay at Gardencourt. She occupied herself in the mornings with literary labour; but in spite of this Isabel spent many hours with her friend, who, once her daily task performed, deprecated, in fact defied, isolation. Isabel speedily found occasion to desire her to desist from celebrating the charms of their common sojourn in print, having discovered, on the second morning of Miss Stackpole's visit, that she was engaged on a letter to the *Interviewer*, of which the title, in her exquisitely neat and legible hand (exactly that of the copybooks which our heroine remembered at school) was 'Americans and Tudors—Glimpses of Gardencourt.' Miss Stackpole, with the best conscience in the world, offered to read her letter to Isabel, who immediately put in her protest.

'I don't think you ought to do that. I don't think you ought to describe the place.'

Henrietta gazed at her as usual. 'Why, it's just what the people want, and it's a lovely place.'

'It's too lovely to be put in the newspapers, and it's not what my uncle wants.'

'Don't you believe that!' cried Henrietta. 'They're always delighted afterwards.'

‘My uncle won’t be delighted—nor my cousin either. They’ll consider it a breach of hospitality.’

Miss Stackpole showed no sense of confusion; she simply wiped her pen, very neatly, upon an elegant little implement which she kept for the purpose, and put away her manuscript. ‘Of course if you don’t approve I won’t do it; but I sacrifice a beautiful subject.’

‘There are plenty of other subjects, there are subjects all round you. We’ll take some drives; I’ll show you some charming scenery.’

‘Scenery’s not my department; I always need a human interest. You know I’m deeply human, Isabel; I always was,’ Miss Stackpole rejoined. ‘I was going to bring in your cousin—the alienated American. There’s a great demand just now for the alienated American, and your cousin’s a beautiful specimen. I should have handled him severely.’

‘He would have died of it!’ Isabel exclaimed. ‘Not of the severity, but of the publicity.’

‘Well, I should have liked to kill him a little. And I should have delighted to do your uncle, who seems to me a much nobler type—the American faithful still. He’s a grand old man; I don’t see how he can object to my paying him honour.’

Isabel looked at her companion in much wonderment; it struck her as strange that a nature in which she found so much to esteem should break down so in spots. ‘My poor Henrietta,’ she said, ‘you’ve no sense of privacy.’

Henrietta coloured deeply, and for a moment her brilliant eyes were suffused, while Isabel found her more than ever inconsequent. ‘You do me great injustice,’ said Miss Stackpole with dignity. ‘I’ve never written a word about myself!’

‘I’m very sure of that; but it seems to me one should be modest for others also!’

‘Ah, that’s very good!’ cried Henrietta, seizing her pen again. ‘Just let me make a note of it and I’ll put it in somewhere.’ She was a thoroughly good-natured woman, and half an hour later she was in as cheerful a mood as should have been looked for in a newspaperlady in want of matter. ‘I’ve promised to do the social side,’ she said to Isabel; ‘and how can I do it unless I get ideas? If I can’t describe this place don’t you know some place I *can* describe?’ Isabel promised she would bethink herself, and the next day, in conversation with her friend, she happened to mention her visit to Lord Warburton’s ancient house. ‘Ah, you must take me there—that’s just the place for me!’ Miss Stackpole cried. ‘I must get a glimpse of the nobility.’

‘I can’t take you,’ said Isabel; ‘but Lord Warburton’s coming here, and you’ll have a chance to see him and observe him. Only if you intend to repeat his conversation I shall certainly give him warning.’

‘Don’t do that,’ her companion pleaded; ‘I want him to be natural.’

‘An Englishman’s never so natural as when he’s holding his tongue,’ Isabel declared.

It was not apparent, at the end of three days, that her cousin had, according to her prophecy, lost his heart to their visitor, though he had spent a good deal of time in her society. They strolled about the park together and sat under the trees, and in the afternoon, when it was delightful to float along the Thames, Miss Stackpole occupied a place in the boat in which hitherto Ralph had had but a single companion. Her presence proved somehow less irreducible to soft particles than Ralph had expected in the natural perturbation of his sense of the perfect solubility of that of his cousin; for the correspondent of the *Interviewer* prompted mirth in him, and he had long since decided that the *crescendo* of mirth should be the flower of his declining days. Henrietta, on her side, failed a little to justify Isabel’s declaration with regard to her indifference to masculine opinion; for poor Ralph appeared to have presented himself to her as an irritating problem, which it would be almost immoral not to work out.

‘What does he do for a living?’ she asked of Isabel the evening of her arrival. ‘Does he go round all day with his hands in his pockets?’

‘He does nothing,’ smiled Isabel; ‘he’s a gentleman of large leisure.’

‘Well, I call that a shame—when I have to work like a carconductor,’* Miss Stackpole replied. ‘I should like to show him up.’

‘He’s in wretched health; he’s quite unfit for work,’ Isabel urged.

‘Pshaw! don’t you believe it. I work when I’m sick,’ cried her friend. Later, when she stepped into the boat on joining the waterparty, she remarked to Ralph that she supposed he hated her and would like to drown her.

‘Ah no,’ said Ralph, ‘I keep my victims for a slower torture. And you’d be such an interesting one!’

‘Well, you do torture me; I may say that. But I shock all your prejudices; that’s one comfort.’

‘My prejudices? I haven’t a prejudice to bless myself with. There’s intellectual poverty for you.’

‘The more shame to you; I’ve some delicious ones. Of course I spoil your flirtation, or whatever it is you call it, with your cousin; but I don’t care for that, as I render her the service of drawing you out. She’ll see how thin you are.’

‘Ah, do draw me out!’ Ralph exclaimed. ‘So few people will take the trouble.’

Miss Stackpole, in this undertaking, appeared to shrink from no effort; resorting largely, whenever the opportunity offered, to the natural expedient of interrogation. On the following day the weather was bad, and in the afternoon the young man, by way of providing indoor amusement, offered to show her the pictures. Henrietta strolled through the long gallery in his society, while he pointed out its principal ornaments and mentioned the painters and subjects. Miss Stackpole looked at the pictures in perfect silence, committing herself to no opinion, and Ralph was gratified by the fact that she delivered herself of none of the little ready-made ejaculations of delight of which the visitors to Gardencourt were so frequently lavish. This young lady indeed, to do her justice, was but little addicted to the use of conventional terms; there was something earnest and inventive in her tone, which at times, in its strained deliberation, suggested a person of high culture speaking a foreign language. Ralph Touchett subsequently learned that she had at one time officiated as art-critic to a journal of the other world; but she appeared, in spite of this fact, to carry in her pocket none of the small change of admiration. Suddenly, just after he had called her attention to a charming Constable,* she turned and looked at him as if he himself had been a picture.

‘Do you always spend your time like this?’ she demanded.

‘I seldom spend it so agreeably.’

‘Well, you know what I mean—without any regular occupation.’

‘Ah,’ said Ralph, ‘I’m the idlest man living.’

Miss Stackpole directed her gaze to the Constable again, and Ralph bespoke her attention for a small Lancret* hanging near it, which represented a gentleman in a pink doublet and hose and a ruff, leaning against the pedestal of the statue of a nymph in a garden and playing the guitar to two ladies seated on the grass. ‘That’s my ideal of a regular occupation,’ he said.

Miss Stackpole turned to him again, and, though her eyes had rested upon the picture, he saw she had missed the subject. She was thinking of something much more serious. ‘I don’t see how you can reconcile it to your conscience.’

‘My dear lady, I *have* no conscience!’

‘Well, I advise you to cultivate one. You’ll need it the next time you go to America.’

‘I shall probably never go again.’

‘Are you ashamed to show yourself?’

Ralph meditated with a mild smile. ‘I suppose that if one has no conscience one has no shame.’

‘Well, you’ve got plenty of assurance,’ Henrietta declared. ‘Do you consider it right to give up your country?’

‘Ah, one doesn’t give up one’s country any more than one gives up one’s grandmother. They’re both antecedent to choice—elements of one’s composition that are not to be eliminated.’

‘I suppose that means that you’ve tried and been worsted. What do they think of you over here?’

‘They delight in me.’

‘That’s because you truckle to them.’

‘Ah, set it down a little to my natural charm!’ Ralph sighed.

‘I don’t know anything about your natural charm. If you’ve got any charm it’s quite unnatural. It’s wholly acquired—or at least you’ve tried hard to acquire it, living over here. I don’t say you’ve succeeded. It’s a charm that I don’t appreciate, anyway. Make yourself useful in some way, and then we’ll talk about it.’

‘Well, now, tell me what I shall do,’ said Ralph.

‘Go right home, to begin with.’

‘Yes, I see. And then?’

‘Take right hold of something.’

‘Well, now, what sort of thing?’

‘Anything you please, so long as you take hold. Some new idea, some big work.’

‘Is it very difficult to take hold?’ Ralph enquired.

‘Not if you put your heart into it.’

‘Ah, my heart,’ said Ralph. ‘If it depends upon my heart—!’

‘Haven’t you got a heart?’

‘I had one a few days ago, but I’ve lost it since.’

‘You’re not serious,’ Miss Stackpole remarked; ‘that’s what’s the matter with you.’ But for all this, in a day or two, she again permitted him to fix her attention and on the later occasion assigned a different cause to her mysterious perversity. ‘I know what’s the matter with you, Mr Touchett,’ she said. ‘You think you’re too good to get married.’

‘I thought so till I knew you, Miss Stackpole,’ Ralph answered; ‘and then I suddenly changed my mind.’

‘Oh pshaw!’ Henrietta groaned.

‘Then it seemed to me,’ said Ralph, ‘that I was not good enough.’

‘It would improve you. Besides, it’s your duty.’

‘Ah,’ cried the young man, ‘one has so many duties! Is that a duty too?’

‘Of course it is—did you never know that before? It’s every one’s duty to get married.’

Ralph meditated a moment; he was disappointed. There was something in Miss Stackpole he had begun to like; it seemed to him that if she was not a charming woman she was at least a very good ‘sort.’ She was wanting in distinction, but, as Isabel had said, she was brave: she went into cages, she flourished lashes, like a spangled liontamer. He had not supposed her to be capable of vulgar arts, but these last words struck him as a false note. When a marriageable young woman urges matrimony on an unencumbered young man the most obvious explanation of her conduct is not the altruistic impulse.

‘Ah, well now, there’s a good deal to be said about that,’ Ralph rejoined.

‘There may be, but that’s the principal thing. I must say I think it looks very exclusive, going round all alone, as if you thought no woman was good enough for you. Do you think you’re better than any one else in the world? In America it’s usual for people to marry.’

‘If it’s my duty,’ Ralph asked, ‘is it not, by analogy, yours as well?’

Miss Stackpole’s ocular surfaces unwinkingly caught the sun. ‘Have you the fond hope of finding a flaw in my reasoning? Of course I’ve as good a right to marry as any one else.’

‘Well then,’ said Ralph, ‘I won’t say it vexes me to see you single. It delights me rather.’

‘You’re not serious yet. You never will be.’

‘Shall you not believe me to be so on the day I tell you I desire to give up the practice of going around alone?’

Miss Stackpole looked at him for a moment in a manner which seemed to announce a reply that might technically be called encouraging. But to his great surprise this expression suddenly resolved itself into an appearance of alarm and even of resentment. ‘No, not even then,’ she answered dryly. After which she walked away.

‘I’ve not conceived a passion for your friend,’ Ralph said that evening to Isabel, ‘though we talked some time this morning about it.’

‘And you said something she didn’t like,’ the girl replied.

Ralph stared. ‘Has she complained of me?’

‘She told me she thinks there’s something very low in the tone of Europeans towards women.’

‘Does she call me a European?’

‘One of the worst. She told me you had said to her something that an American never would have said. But she didn’t repeat it.’

Ralph treated himself to a luxury of laughter. ‘She’s an extraordinary combination. Did she think I was making love to her?’

‘No; I believe even Americans do that. But she apparently thought you mistook the intention of something she had said, and put an unkind construction on it.’

‘I thought she was proposing marriage to *me* and I accepted her. Was that unkind?’

Isabel smiled. ‘It was unkind to me. I don’t want you to marry.’

‘My dear cousin, what’s one to do among you all?’ Ralph demanded. ‘Miss Stackpole tells me it’s my bounden duty, and that it’s hers, in general, to see I do mine!’

‘She has a great sense of duty,’ said Isabel gravely. ‘She has indeed, and it’s the motive of everything she says. That’s what I like her for. She thinks it’s unworthy of you to keep so many things to yourself.

That's what she wanted to express. If you thought she was trying to—to attract you, you were very wrong.'

'It's true it was an odd way, but I did think she was trying to attract me. Forgive my depravity.'

'You're very conceited. She had no interested views, and never supposed you would think she had.'

'One must be very modest then to talk with such women,' Ralph said humbly. 'But it's a very strange type. She's too personal—considering that she expects other people not to be. She walks in without knocking at the door.'

'Yes,' Isabel admitted, 'she doesn't sufficiently recognise the existence of knockers; and indeed I'm not sure that she doesn't think them rather a pretentious ornament. She thinks one's door should stand ajar. But I persist in liking her.'

'I persist in thinking her too familiar,' Ralph rejoined, naturally somewhat uncomfortable under the sense of having been doubly deceived in Miss Stackpole.

'Well,' said Isabel, smiling, 'I'm afraid it's because she's rather vulgar that I like her.'

'She would be flattered by your reason!'

'If I should tell her I wouldn't express it in that way. I should say it's because there's something of the "people" in her.'

'What do you know about the people? and what does she, for that matter?'

'She knows a great deal, and I know enough to feel that she's a kind of emanation of the great democracy—of the continent, the country, the nation. I don't say that she sums it all up, that would be too much to ask of her. But she suggests it; she vividly figures it.'

'You like her then for patriotic reasons. I'm afraid it is on those very grounds I object to her.'

'Ah,' said Isabel with a kind of joyous sigh, 'I like so many things! If a thing strikes me with a certain intensity I accept it. I don't want to swagger, but I suppose I'm rather versatile. I like people to be totally different from Henrietta—in the style of Lord Warburton's sisters for instance. So long as I look at the Misses Molyneux they seem to me to answer a kind of ideal. Then Henrietta presents herself, and I'm straightway convinced by *her*; not so much in respect to herself as in respect to what masses behind her.'

'Ah, you mean the back view of her,' Ralph suggested.

'What she says is true,' his cousin answered; 'you'll never be serious. I like the great country stretching away beyond the rivers and across the prairies, blooming and smiling, and spreading till it stops at the green Pacific! A strong, sweet, fresh odour seems to rise from it, and Henrietta—pardon my simile—has something of that odour in her garments.'

Isabel blushed a little as she concluded this speech, and the blush, together with the momentary ardour she had thrown into it, was so becoming to her that Ralph stood smiling at her for a moment after she had ceased speaking. 'I'm not sure the Pacific's so green as that,' he said; 'but you're a young woman of imagination. Henrietta, however, does smell of the Future—it almost knocks one down!'

XI

HE took a resolve after this not to misinterpret her words even when Miss Stackpole appeared to strike the personal note most strongly. He bethought himself that persons, in her view, were simple and homogeneous organisms, and that he, for his own part, was too perverted a representative of the nature of man to have a right to deal with her in strict reciprocity. He carried out his resolve with a great deal of tact, and the young lady found in renewed contact with him no obstacle to the exercise of her genius for unshrinking enquiry, the general application of her confidence. Her situation at Gardencourt therefore, appreciated as we have seen her to be by Isabel and full of appreciation herself of that free play of intelligence which, to her sense, rendered Isabel's character a sisterspirit, and of the easy venerableness of Mr Touchett, whose noble tone, as she said, met with her full approval—her situation at Gardencourt would have been perfectly comfortable had she not conceived an irresistible mistrust of the little lady for whom she had at first supposed herself obliged to 'allow' as mistress of the house. She presently discovered, in truth, that this obligation was of the lightest and that Mrs Touchett cared very little how Miss Stackpole behaved. Mrs Touchett had defined her to Isabel as both an adventuress and a bore—adventuresses usually giving one more of a thrill; she had expressed some surprise at her niece's having selected such a friend, yet had immediately added that she knew Isabel's friends were her own affair and that she had never undertaken to like them all or to restrict the girl to those she liked.

'If you could see none but the people I like, my dear, you'd have a very small society,' Mrs Touchett frankly admitted; 'and I don't think I like any man or woman well enough to recommend them to you. When it comes to recommending it's a serious affair. I don't like Miss Stackpole—everything about her displeases me; she talks so much too loud and looks at one as if one wanted to look at *her*—which one doesn't. I'm sure she has lived all her life in a boardinghouse, and I detest the manners and the liberties of such places. If you ask me if I prefer my own manners, which you doubtless think very bad, I'll tell you that I prefer them immensely. Miss Stackpole knows I detest boarding-house civilisation, and she detests me for detesting it, because she thinks it the highest in the world. She'd like Gardencourt a great deal better if it were a boarding-house. For me, I find it almost too much of one! We shall never get on together therefore, and there's no use trying.'

Mrs Touchett was right in guessing that Henrietta disapproved of her, but she had not quite put her finger on the reason. A day or two after Miss Stackpole's arrival she had made some invidious reflexions on American hotels, which excited a vein of counterargument on the part of the correspondent of the *Interviewer*, who in the exercise of her profession had acquainted herself, in the western world, with every form of caravansary. Henrietta expressed the opinion that American hotels were the best in the world, and Mrs Touchett, fresh from a renewed struggle with them, recorded a conviction that they were the worst. Ralph, with his experimental geniality, suggested, by way of healing the breach, that the truth lay between the two extremes and that the establishments in question ought to be described as fair middling. This contribution to the discussion, however, Miss Stackpole rejected with scorn. Middling indeed! If they were not the best in the world they were the worst, but there was nothing middling about an American hotel.

'We judge from different points of view, evidently,' said Mrs Touchett. 'I like to be treated as an individual; you like to be treated as a "party".'

'I don't know what you mean,' Henrietta replied. 'I like to be treated as an American lady.'

'Poor American ladies!' cried Mrs Touchett with a laugh. 'They're the slaves of slaves.'

'They're the companions of freemen,' Henrietta retorted.

'They're the companions of their servants—the Irish chambermaid and the negro waiter. They share their work.'

'Do you call the domestics in an American household "slaves"?' Miss Stackpole enquired. 'If that's the way you desire to treat them, no wonder you don't like America.'

'If you've not good servants you're miserable,' Mrs Touchett serenely said. 'They're very bad in America, but I've five perfect ones in Florence.'

'I don't see what you want with five,' Henrietta couldn't help observing. 'I don't think I should like to see five persons surrounding me in that menial position.'

'I like them in that position better than in some others,' proclaimed Mrs Touchett with much meaning.

‘Should you like me better if I were your butler, dear?’ her husband asked.

‘I don’t think I should: you wouldn’t at all have the *tenue**.’

‘The companions of freemen—I like that, Miss Stackpole,’ said Ralph. ‘It’s a beautiful description.’

‘When I said freemen I didn’t mean you, sir!’

And this was the only reward that Ralph got for his compliment. Miss Stackpole was baffled; she evidently thought there was something treasonable in Mrs Touchett’s appreciation of a class which she privately judged to be a mysterious survival of feudalism. It was perhaps because her mind was oppressed with this image that she suffered some days to elapse before she took occasion to say to Isabel: ‘My dear friend, I wonder if you’re growing faithless.’

‘Faithless? Faithless to you, Henrietta?’

‘No, that would be a great pain; but it’s not that.’

‘Faithless to my country then?’

‘Ah, that I hope will never be. When I wrote to you from Liverpool I said I had something particular to tell you. You’ve never asked me what it is. Is it because you’ve suspected?’

‘Suspected what? As a rule I don’t think I suspect,’ said Isabel. ‘I remember now that phrase in your letter, but I confess I had forgotten it. What have you to tell me?’

Henrietta looked disappointed, and her steady gaze betrayed it. ‘You don’t ask that right—as if you thought it important. You’re changed—you’re thinking of other things.’

‘Tell me what you mean, and I’ll think of that.’

‘Will you really think of it? That’s what I wish to be sure of.’

‘I’ve not much control of my thoughts, but I’ll do my best,’ said Isabel. Henrietta gazed at her, in silence, for a period which tried Isabel’s patience, so that our heroine added at last: ‘Do you mean that you’re going to be married?’

‘Not till I’ve seen Europe!’ said Miss Stackpole. ‘What are you laughing at?’ she went on. ‘What I mean is that Mr Goodwood came out in the steamer with me.’

‘Ah!’ Isabel responded.

‘You say *that* right. I had a good deal of talk with him; he has come after you.’

‘Did he tell you so?’

‘No, he told me nothing; that’s how I knew it,’ said Henrietta cleverly. ‘He said very little about you, but I spoke of you a good deal.’

Isabel waited. At the mention of Mr Goodwood’s name she had turned a little pale. ‘I’m very sorry you did that,’ she observed at last.

‘It was a pleasure to me, and I liked the way he listened. I could have talked a long time to such a listener; he was so quiet, so intense; he drank it all in.’

‘What did you say about me?’ Isabel asked.

‘I said you were on the whole the finest creature I know.’

‘I’m very sorry for that. He thinks too well of me already; he oughtn’t to be encouraged.’

‘He’s dying for a little encouragement. I see his face now, and his earnest absorbed look while I talked. I never saw an ugly man look so handsome.’

‘He’s very simple-minded,’ said Isabel. ‘And he’s not so ugly.’

‘There’s nothing so simplifying as a grand passion.’

‘It’s not a grand passion; I’m very sure it’s not that.’

‘You don’t say that as if you were sure.’

Isabel gave rather a cold smile. ‘I shall say it better to Mr Goodwood himself.’

‘He’ll soon give you a chance,’ said Henrietta. Isabel offered no answer to this assertion, which her companion made with an air of great confidence. ‘He’ll find you changed,’ the latter pursued. ‘You’ve been affected by your new surroundings.’

‘Very likely. I’m affected by everything.’

‘By everything but Mr Goodwood!’ Miss Stackpole exclaimed with a slightly harsh hilarity.

Isabel failed even to smile back and in a moment she said: ‘Did he ask you to speak to me?’

‘Not in so many words. But his eyes asked it—and his handshake, when he bade me good-bye.’

‘Thank you for doing so.’ And Isabel turned away.

‘Yes, you’re changed; you’ve got new ideas over here,’ her friend continued. ‘I hope so,’ said Isabel; ‘one should get as many new ideas as possible.’

‘Yes; but they shouldn’t interfere with the old ones when the old ones have been the right ones.’

Isabel turned about again. ‘If you mean that I had any idea with regard to Mr Goodwood—!’ But she faltered before her friend’s implacable glitter.

‘My dear child, you certainly encouraged him.’

Isabel made for the moment as if to deny this charge; instead of which, however, she presently answered: ‘It’s very true. I did encourage him.’ And then she asked if her companion had learned from Mr Goodwood what he intended to do. It was a concession to her curiosity, for she disliked discussing the subject and found Henrietta wanting in delicacy.

‘I asked him, and he said he meant to do nothing,’ Miss Stackpole answered. ‘But I don’t believe that; he’s not a man to do nothing. He is a man of high, bold action. Whatever happens to him he’ll always do something, and whatever he does will always be right.’

‘I quite believe that.’ Henrietta might be wanting in delicacy, but it touched the girl, all the same, to hear this declaration.

‘Ah, you *do* care for him!’ her visitor rang out.

‘Whatever he does will always be right,’ Isabel repeated. ‘When a man’s of that infallible mould what does it matter to him what one feels?’

‘It may not matter to him, but it matters to one’s self.’

‘Ah, what it matters to me—that’s not what we’re discussing,’ said Isabel with a cold smile.

This time her companion was grave. ‘Well, I don’t care; you *have* changed. You’re not the girl you were a few short weeks ago, and Mr Goodwood will see it. I expect him here any day.’

‘I hope he’ll hate me then,’ said Isabel.

‘I believe you hope it about as much as I believe him capable of it.’

To this observation our heroine made no return; she was absorbed in the alarm given her by Henrietta’s intimation that Caspar Goodwood would present himself at Gardencourt. She pretended to herself, however, that she thought the event impossible, and, later, she communicated her disbelief to her friend. For the next forty-eight hours, nevertheless, she stood prepared to hear the young man’s name announced. The feeling pressed upon her; it made the air sultry, as if there were to be a change of weather; and the weather, socially speaking, had been so agreeable during Isabel’s stay at Gardencourt that any change would be for the worse. Her suspense indeed was dissipated the second day. She had walked into the park in company with the sociable Bunchie, and after strolling about for some time, in a manner at once listless and restless, had seated herself on a garden bench, within sight of the house, beneath a spreading beech, where, in a white dress ornamented with black ribbons, she formed among the flickering shadows a graceful and harmonious image. She entertained herself for some moments with talking to the little terrier, as to whom the proposal of an ownership divided with her cousin had been applied as impartially as possible—as impartially as Bunchie’s own somewhat fickle and inconstant sympathies would allow. But she was notified for the first time, on this occasion, of the finite character of Bunchie’s intellect; hitherto she had been mainly struck with its extent. It seemed to her at last that she would do well to take a book; formerly, when heavy-hearted, she had been able, with the help of some well-chosen volume, to transfer the seat of consciousness to the organ of pure reason. Of late, it was not to be denied, literature had seemed a fading light, and even after she had reminded herself that her uncle’s library was provided with a complete set of those authors which no gentleman’s collection should be without, she sat motionless and empty-handed, her eyes bent on the cool green turf of the lawn. Her meditations were presently interrupted by the arrival of a servant who handed her a letter. The letter bore the London postmark and was addressed in a hand she knew—that came into her vision, already so held by him, with the vividness of the writer’s voice or his face. This document proved short and may be given entire.

MY DEAR MISS ARCHER—I don’t know whether you will have heard of my coming to England, but even if you have not it will scarcely be a surprise to you. You will remember that when you gave me my dismissal at Albany, three months ago, I did not accept it. I protested against it. You in fact appeared to accept my protest and to admit that I had the right on my side. I had come to see you with the hope that you would let me bring you over to my conviction; my reasons for entertaining this hope had been of the best. But you disappointed it; I found you changed, and you were able to give me no reason for the change. You admitted that you were unreasonable, and it was the only concession you would make; but it

was a very cheap one, because that's not your character. No, you are not, and you never will be, arbitrary or capricious. Therefore it is that I believe you will let me see you again. You told me that I'm not disagreeable to you, and I believe it; for I don't see why that should be. I shall always think of you; I shall never think of any one else. I came to England simply because you are here; I couldn't stay at home after you had gone: I hated the country because you were not in it. If I like this country at present it is only because it holds you. I have been to England before, but have never enjoyed it much. May I not come and see you for half an hour? This at present is the dearest wish of yours faithfully

CASPAR GOODWOOD.

Isabel read this missive with such deep attention that she had not perceived an approaching tread on the soft grass. Looking up, however, as she mechanically folded it she saw Lord Warburton standing before her.

XII

SHE put the letter into her pocket and offered her visitor a smile of welcome, exhibiting no trace of discomposure and half surprised at her coolness.

'They told me you were out here,' said Lord Warburton; 'and as there was no one in the drawing-room and it's really you that I wish to see, I came out with no more ado.'

Isabel had got up; she felt a wish, for the moment, that he should not sit down beside her. 'I was just going indoors.'

'Please don't do that; it's much jollier here; I've ridden over from Lockleigh; it's a lovely day.' His smile was peculiarly friendly and pleasing, and his whole person seemed to emit that radiance of goodfeeling and good fare which had formed the charm of the girl's first impression of him. It surrounded him like a zone of fine June weather.

'We'll walk about a little then,' said Isabel, who could not divest herself of the sense of an intention on the part of her visitor and who wished both to elude the intention and to satisfy her curiosity about it. It had flashed upon her vision once before, and it had given her on that occasion, as we know, a certain alarm. This alarm was composed of several elements, not all of which were disagreeable; she had indeed spent some days in analysing them and had succeeded in separating the pleasant part of the idea of Lord Warburton's 'making up' to her from the painful. It may appear to some readers that the young lady was both precipitate and unduly fastidious; but the latter of these facts, if the charge be true, may serve to exonerate her from the discredit of the former. She was not eager to convince herself that a territorial magnate, as she had heard Lord Warburton called, was smitten with her charms; the fact of a declaration from such a source carrying with it really more questions than it would answer. She had received a strong impression of his being a 'personage,' and she had occupied herself in examining the image so conveyed. At the risk of adding to the evidence of her self-sufficiency it must be said that there had been moments when this possibility of admiration by a personage represented to her an aggression almost to the degree of an affront, quite to the degree of an inconvenience. She had never yet known a personage; there had been no personages, in this sense, in her life; there were probably none such at all in her native land. When she had thought of individual eminence she had thought of it on the basis of character and wit—of what one might like in a gentleman's mind and in his talk. She herself was a character—she couldn't help being aware of that; and hitherto her visions of a completed consciousness had connected themselves largely with moral images—things as to which the question would be whether they pleased her sublime soul. Lord Warburton loomed up before her, largely and brightly, as a collection of attributes and powers which were not to be measured by this simple rule, but which demanded a different sort of appreciation —an appreciation that the girl, with her habit of judging quickly and freely, felt she lacked patience to bestow. He appeared to demand of her something that no one else, as it were, had presumed to do. What she felt was that a territorial, a political, a social magnate had conceived the design of drawing her into the system in which he rather invidiously lived and moved. A certain instinct, not imperious, but persuasive, told her to resist—murmured to her that virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own. It told her other things besides—things which both contradicted and confirmed each other; that a girl might do much worse than trust herself to such a man and that it would be very interesting to see something of his system from his own point of view; that on the other hand, however, there was evidently a great deal of it which she should regard only as a complication of every hour, and that even in the whole there was something stiff and stupid which would make it a burden. Furthermore there was a young man lately come from America who had no system at all, but who had a character of which it was useless for her to try to persuade herself that the impression on her mind had been light. The letter she carried in her pocket all sufficiently reminded her of the contrary. Smile not, however, I venture to repeat, at this simple young woman from Albany who debated whether she should accept an English peer before he had offered himself and who was disposed to believe that on the whole she could do better. She was a person of great good faith, and if there was a great deal of folly in her wisdom those who judge her severely may have the satisfaction of finding that, later, she became consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity.

Lord Warburton seemed quite ready to walk, to sit or to do anything that Isabel should propose, and he gave her this assurance with his usual air of being particularly pleased to exercise a social virtue. But he was, nevertheless, not in command of his emotions, and as he strolled beside her for a moment, in

silence, looking at her without letting her know it, there was something embarrassed in his glance and his misdirected laughter. Yes, assuredly—as we have touched on the point, we may return to it for a moment again—the English are the most romantic people in the world and Lord Warburton was about to give an example of it. He was about to take a step which would astonish all his friends and displease a great many of them, and which had superficially nothing to recommend it. The young lady who trod the turf beside him had come from a queer country across the sea which he knew a good deal about; her antecedents, her associations were very vague to his mind except in so far as they were generic, and in this sense they showed as distinct and unimportant. Miss Archer had neither a fortune nor the sort of beauty that justifies a man to the multitude, and he calculated that he had spent about twenty-six hours in her company. He had summed up all this—the perversity of the impulse, which had declined to avail itself of the most liberal opportunities to subside, and the judgement of mankind, as exemplified particularly in the more quickly-judging half of it: he had looked these things well in the face and then had dismissed them from his thoughts. He cared no more for them than for the rosebud in his buttonhole. It is the good fortune of a man who for the greater part of a lifetime has abstained without effort from making himself disagreeable to his friends, that when the need comes for such a course it is not discredited by irritating associations.

'I hope you had a pleasant ride,' said Isabel, who observed her companion's hesitancy.

'It would have been pleasant if for nothing else than that it brought me here.'

'Are you so fond of Gardencourt?' the girl asked, more and more sure that he meant to make some appeal to her; wishing not to challenge him if he hesitated, and yet to keep all the quietness of her reason if he proceeded. It suddenly came upon her that her situation was one which a few weeks ago she would have deemed deeply romantic: the park of an old English country-house, with the foreground embellished by a 'great' (as she supposed) nobleman in the act of making love to a young lady who, on careful inspection, should be found to present remarkable analogies with herself. But if she was now the heroine of the situation she succeeded scarcely the less in looking at it from the outside.

'I care nothing for Gardencourt,' said her companion. 'I care only for you.'

'You've known me too short a time to have a right to say that, and I can't believe you're serious.'

These words of Isabel's were not perfectly sincere, for she had no doubt whatever that he himself was. They were simply a tribute to the fact, of which she was perfectly aware, that those he had just uttered would have excited surprise on the part of a vulgar world. And, moreover, if anything beside the sense she had already acquired that Lord Warburton was not a loose thinker had been needed to convince her, the tone in which he replied would quite have served the purpose.

'One's right in such a matter is not measured by the time, Miss Archer; it's measured by the feeling itself. If I were to wait three months it would make no difference; I shall not be more sure of what I mean than I am to-day. Of course I've seen you very little, but my impression dates from the very first hour we met. I lost no time, I fell in love with you then. It was at first sight, as the novels say; I know now that's not a fancy-phrase, and I shall think better of novels for evermore. Those two days I spent here settled it; I don't know whether you suspected I was doing so, but I paid—mentally speaking I mean—the greatest possible attention to you. Nothing you said, nothing you did, was lost upon me. When you came to Lockleigh the other day—or rather when you went away—I was perfectly sure. Nevertheless I made up my mind to think it over and to question myself narrowly. I've done so; all these days I've done nothing else. I don't make mistakes about such things; I'm a very judicious animal. I don't go off easily, but when I'm touched, it's for life. It's for life, Miss Archer, it's for life,' Lord Warburton repeated in the kindest, tenderest, pleasantest voice Isabel had ever heard, and looking at her with eyes charged with the light of a passion that had sifted itself clear of the baser parts of emotion—the heat, the violence, the unreason—and that burned as steadily as a lamp in a windless place. By tacit consent, as he talked, they had walked more and more slowly, and at last they stopped and he took her hand. 'Ah, Lord Warburton, how little you know me!' Isabel said very gently. Gently too she drew her hand away.

'Don't taunt me with that; that I don't know you better makes me unhappy enough already; it's all my loss. But that's what I want, and it seems to me I'm taking the best way. If you'll be my wife, then I shall know you, and when I tell you all the good I think of you you'll not be able to say it's from ignorance.'

'If you know me little I know you even less,' said Isabel.

'You mean that, unlike yourself, I may not improve on acquaintance? Ah, of course that's very possible. But think, to speak to you as I do, how determined I must be to try and give satisfaction! You do like me rather, don't you?'

'I like you very much, Lord Warburton,' she answered; and at this moment she liked him immensely.

‘I thank you for saying that; it shows you don’t regard me as a stranger. I really believe I’ve filled all the other relations of life very creditably, and I don’t see why I shouldn’t fill this one—in which I offer myself to you—seeing that I care so much more about it. Ask the people who know me well; I’ve friends who’ll speak for me.’

‘I don’t need the recommendation of your friends,’ said Isabel.

‘Ah now, that’s delightful of you. You believe in me yourself.’

‘Completely,’ Isabel declared. She quite glowed there, inwardly, with the pleasure of feeling she did.

The light in her companion’s eyes turned into a smile, and he gave a long exhalation of joy. ‘If you’re mistaken, Miss Archer, let me lose all I possess!’

She wondered whether he meant this for a reminder that he was rich, and, on the instant, felt sure that he didn’t. He was sinking that, as he would have said himself; and indeed he might safely leave it to the memory of any interlocutor, especially of one to whom he was offering his hand. Isabel had prayed that she might not be agitated, and her mind was tranquil enough, even while she listened and asked herself what it was best she should say, to indulge in this incidental criticism. What she should say, had she asked herself? Her foremost wish was to say something if possible not less kind than what he had said to her. His words had carried perfect conviction with them; she felt she did, all so mysteriously, matter to him. ‘I thank you more than I can say for your offer,’ she returned at last. ‘It does me great honour.’

‘Ah, don’t say that!’ he broke out. ‘I was afraid you’d say something like that. I don’t see what you’ve to do with that sort of thing. I don’t see why you should thank me—it’s I who ought to thank you for listening to me: a man you know so little coming down on you with such a thumper! Of course it’s a great question; I must tell you that I’d rather ask it than have it to answer myself. But the way you’ve listened—or at least your having listened at all—gives me some hope.’

‘Don’t hope too much,’ Isabel said.

‘Oh, Miss Archer!’ her companion murmured, smiling again, in his seriousness, as if such a warning might perhaps be taken but as the play of high spirits, the exuberance of elation.

‘Should you be greatly surprised if I were to beg you not to hope at all?’ Isabel asked.

‘Surprised? I don’t know what you mean by surprise. It wouldn’t be that; it would be a feeling very much worse.’

Isabel walked on again; she was silent for some minutes. ‘I’m very sure that, highly as I already think of you, my opinion of you, if I should know you well, would only rise. But I’m by no means sure that you wouldn’t be disappointed. And I say that not in the least out of conventional modesty; it’s perfectly sincere.’

‘I’m willing to risk it, Miss Archer,’ her companion replied.

‘It’s a great question, as you say. It’s a very difficult question.’

‘I don’t expect you of course to answer it outright. Think it over as long as may be necessary. If I can gain by waiting I’ll gladly wait a long time. Only remember that in the end my dearest happiness depends on your answer.’

‘I should be very sorry to keep you in suspense,’ said Isabel.

‘Oh, don’t mind. I’d much rather have a good answer six months hence than a bad one to-day.’

‘But it’s very probable that even six months hence I shouldn’t be able to give you one that you’d think good.’

‘Why not, since you really like me?’

‘Ah, you must never doubt that,’ said Isabel.

‘Well then, I don’t see what more you ask!’

‘It’s not what I ask; it’s what I can give. I don’t think I should suit you; I really don’t think I should.’

‘You needn’t worry about that. That’s my affair. You needn’t be a better royalist than the king.’

‘It’s not only that,’ said Isabel; ‘but I’m not sure I wish to marry any one.’

‘Very likely you don’t. I’ve no doubt a great many women begin that way,’ said his lordship, who, be it averred, did not in the least believe in the axiom he thus beguiled his anxiety by uttering. ‘But they’re frequently persuaded.’

‘Ah, that’s because they want to be!’ And Isabel lightly laughed.

Her suitor’s countenance fell, and he looked at her for a while in silence. ‘I’m afraid it’s my being an Englishman that makes you hesitate,’ he said presently. ‘I know your uncle thinks you ought to marry in your own country.’

Isabel listened to this assertion with some interest; it had never occurred to her that Mr Touchett was likely to discuss her matrimonial prospects with Lord Warburton. ‘Has he told you that?’

‘I remember his making the remark. He spoke perhaps of Americans generally.’

‘He appears himself to have found it very pleasant to live in England.’ Isabel spoke in a manner that might have seemed a little perverse, but which expressed both her constant perception of her uncle’s outward felicity and her general disposition to elude any obligation to take a restricted view.

It gave her companion hope, and he immediately cried with warmth: ‘Ah, my dear Miss Archer, old England’s a very good sort of country, you know! And it will be still better when we’ve furbished it up a little.’

‘Oh, don’t furbish it, Lord Warburton; leave it alone. I like it this way.’

‘Well then, if you like it, I’m more and more unable to see your objection to what I propose.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t make you understand.’

‘You ought at least to try. I’ve a fair intelligence. Are you afraid—afraid of the climate? We can easily live elsewhere, you know. You can pick out your climate, the whole world over.’

These words were uttered with a breadth of candour that was like the embrace of strong arms—that was like the fragrance straight in her face, and by his clean, breathing lips, of she knew not what strange gardens, what charged airs. She would have given her little finger at that moment to feel strongly and simply the impulse to answer: ‘Lord Warburton, it’s impossible for me to do better in this wonderful world, I think, than commit myself, very gratefully, to your loyalty.’ But though she was lost in admiration of her opportunity she managed to move back into the deepest shade of it, even as some wild, caught creature in a vast cage. The ‘splendid’ security so offered her was *not* the greatest she could conceive. What she finally bethought herself of saying was something very different—something that deferred the need of really facing her crisis. ‘Don’t think me unkind if I ask you to say no more about this to-day.’

‘Certainly, certainly!’ her companion cried. ‘I wouldn’t bore you for the world.’

‘You’ve given me a great deal to think about, and I promise you to do it justice.’

‘That’s all I ask of you, of course—and that you’ll remember how absolutely my happiness is in your hands.’

Isabel listened with extreme respect to this admonition, but she said after a minute: ‘I must tell you that what I shall think about is some way of letting you know that what you ask is impossible—letting you know it without making you miserable.’

‘There’s no way to do that, Miss Archer. I won’t say that if you refuse me you’ll kill me; I shall not die of it. But I shall do worse; I shall live to no purpose.’

‘You’ll live to marry a better woman than I.’

‘Don’t say that, please,’ said Lord Warburton very gravely. ‘That’s fair to neither of us.’

‘To marry a worse one then.’

‘If there are better women than you I prefer the bad ones. That’s all I can say,’ he went on with the same earnestness. ‘There’s no accounting for tastes.’

His gravity made her feel equally grave, and she showed it by again requesting him to drop the subject for the present. ‘I’ll speak to you myself—very soon. Perhaps I shall write to you.’

‘At your convenience, yes,’ he replied. ‘Whatever time you take, it must seem to me long, and I suppose I must make the best of that.’

‘I shall not keep you in suspense; I only want to collect my mind a little.’

He gave a melancholy sigh and stood looking at her a moment, with his hands behind him, giving short nervous shakes to his hunting-crop. ‘Do you know I’m very much afraid of it—of that remarkable mind of yours?’

Our heroine’s biographer can scarcely tell why, but the question made her start and brought a conscious blush to her cheek. She returned his look a moment, and then with a note in her voice that might almost have appealed to his compassion, ‘So am I, my lord!’ she oddly exclaimed.

His compassion was not stirred, however; all he possessed of the faculty of pity was needed at home. ‘Ah! be merciful, be merciful,’ he murmured.

‘I think you had better go,’ said Isabel. ‘I’ll write to you.’

‘Very good; but whatever you write I’ll come and see you, you know.’ And then he stood reflecting, his eyes fixed on the observant countenance of Bunchie, who had the air of having understood all that

had been said and of pretending to carry off the indiscretion by a simulated fit of curiosity as to the roots of an ancient oak. ‘There’s one thing more,’ he went on. ‘You know, if you don’t like Lockleigh—if you think it’s damp or anything of that sort—you need never go within fifty miles of it. It’s not damp, by the way; I’ve had the house thoroughly examined; it’s perfectly safe and right. But if you shouldn’t fancy it you needn’t dream of living in it. There’s no difficulty whatever about that; there are plenty of houses. I thought I’d just mention it; some people don’t like a moat, you know. Goodbye.’

‘I adore a moat,’ said Isabel. ‘Good-bye.’

He held out his hand, and she gave him hers a moment—a moment long enough for him to bend his handsome bared head and kiss it. Then, still agitating, in his mastered emotion, his implement of the chase, he walked rapidly away. He was evidently much upset.

Isabel herself was upset, but she had not been affected as she would have imagined. What she felt was not a great responsibility, a great difficulty of choice; it appeared to her there had been no choice in the question. She couldn’t marry Lord Warburton; the idea failed to support any enlightened prejudice in favour of the free exploration of life that she had hitherto entertained or was now capable of entertaining. She must write this to him, she must convince him, and that duty was comparatively simple. But what disturbed her, in the sense that it struck her with wonderment, was this very fact that it cost her so little to refuse a magnificent ‘chance.’ With whatever qualifications one would, Lord Warburton had offered her a great opportunity; the situation might have discomforts, might contain oppressive, might contain narrowing elements, might prove really but a stupefying anodyne; but she did her sex no injustice in believing that nineteen women out of twenty would have accommodated themselves to it without a pang. Why then upon her also should it not irresistibly impose itself? Who was she, what was she, that she should hold herself superior? What view of life, what design upon fate, what conception of happiness, had she that pretended to be larger than these large, these fabulous occasions? If she wouldn’t do such a thing as that then she must do great things, she must do something greater. Poor Isabel found ground to remind herself from time to time that she must not be too proud, and nothing could be more sincere than her prayer to be delivered from such a danger: the isolation and loneliness of pride had for her mind the horror of a desert place. If it had been pride that interfered with her accepting Lord Warburton such a *bêtise** was singularly misplaced; and she was so conscious of liking him that she ventured to assure herself it was the very softness, and the fine intelligence, of sympathy. She liked him too much to marry him, that was the truth; something assured her there was a fallacy somewhere in the glowing logic of the proposition—as *he* saw it—even though she mightn’t put her very finest finger-point on it; and to inflict upon a man who offered so much a wife with a tendency to criticise would be a peculiarly discreditable act. She had promised him she would consider his question, and when, after he had left her, she wandered back to the bench where he had found her and lost herself in meditation, it might have seemed that she was keeping her vow. But this was not the case; she was wondering if she were not a cold, hard, priggish person, and, on her at last getting up and going rather quickly back to the house, felt, as she had said to her friend, really frightened at herself.

XIII

IT was this feeling and not the wish to ask advice—she had no desire whatever for that—that led her to speak to her uncle of what had taken place. She wished to speak to some one; she should feel more natural, more human, and her uncle, for this purpose, presented himself in a more attractive light than either her aunt or her friend Henrietta. Her cousin of course was a possible confidant; but she would have had to do herself violence to air this special secret to Ralph. So the next day, after breakfast, she sought her occasion. Her uncle never left his apartment till the afternoon, but he received his cronies, as he said, in his dressing-room. Isabel had quite taken her place in the class so designated, which, for the rest, included the old man's son, his physician, his personal servant, and even Miss Stackpole. Mrs Touchett did not figure in the list, and this was an obstacle the less to Isabel's finding her host alone. He sat in a complicated mechanical chair, at the open window of his room, looking westward over the park and the river, with his newspapers and letters piled up beside him, his toilet freshly and minutely made, and his smooth, speculative face composed to benevolent expectation.

She approached her point directly. 'I think I ought to let you know that Lord Warburton has asked me to marry him. I suppose I ought to tell my aunt; but it seems best to tell you first.'

The old man expressed no surprise, but thanked her for the confidence she showed him. 'Do you mind telling me whether you accepted him?' he then enquired.

'I've not answered him definitely yet; I've taken a little time to think of it, because that seems more respectful. But I shall not accept him.'

Mr Touchett made no comment upon this; he had the air of thinking that, whatever interest he might take in the matter from the point of view of sociability, he had no active voice in it. 'Well, I told you you'd be a success over here. Americans are highly appreciated.'

'Very highly indeed,' said Isabel. 'But at the cost of seeming both tasteless and ungrateful, I don't think I can marry Lord Warburton.'

'Well,' her uncle went on, 'of course an old man can't judge for a young lady. I'm glad you didn't ask me before you made up your mind. I suppose I ought to tell you,' he added slowly, but as it were not of much consequence, 'that I've known all about it these three days.'

'About Lord Warburton's state of mind?'

'About his intentions, as they say here. He wrote me a very pleasant letter, telling me all about them. Should you like to see his letter?' the old man obligingly asked.

'Thank you; I don't think I care about that. But I'm glad he wrote to you; it was right that he should, and he would be certain to do what was right.'

'Ah well, I guess you do like him!' Mr Touchett declared. 'You needn't pretend you don't.'

'I like him extremely; I'm very free to admit that. But I don't wish to marry any one just now.'

'You think some one may come along whom you may like better. Well, that's very likely,' said Mr Touchett, who appeared to wish to show his kindness to the girl by easing off her decision, as it were, and finding cheerful reasons for it.

'I don't care if I don't meet any one else. I like Lord Warburton quite well enough.' She fell into that appearance of a sudden change of point of view with which she sometimes startled and even displeased her interlocutors.

Her uncle, however, seemed proof against either of these impressions. 'He's a very fine man,' he resumed in a tone which might have passed for that of encouragement. 'His letter was one of the pleasantest I've received for some weeks. I suppose one of the reasons I like it was that it was all about you; that is all except the part that was about himself. I suppose he told you all that.'

'He would have told me everything I wished to ask him,' Isabel said.

'But you didn't feel curious?'

'My curiosity would have been idle—once I had determined to decline his offer.'

'You didn't find it sufficiently attractive?' Mr Touchett enquired.

She was silent a little. 'I suppose it was that,' she presently admitted. 'But I don't know why.'

'Fortunately ladies are not obliged to give reasons,' said her uncle. 'There's a great deal that's

attractive about such an idea; but I don't see why the English should want to entice us away from our native land. I know that we try to attract them over there, but that's because our population is insufficient. Here, you know, they're rather crowded. However, I presume there's room for charming young ladies everywhere.'

'There seems to have been room here for you,' said Isabel, whose eyes had been wandering over the large pleasure-spaces of the park.

Mr Touchett gave a shrewd, conscious smile. 'There's room everywhere, my dear, if you'll pay for it. I sometimes think I've paid too much for this. Perhaps you also might have to pay too much.'

'Perhaps I might,' the girl replied.

That suggestion gave her something more definite to rest on than she had found in her own thoughts, and the fact of this association of her uncle's mild acuteness with her dilemma seemed to prove that she was concerned with the natural and reasonable emotions of life and not altogether a victim to intellectual eagerness and vague ambitions—ambitions reaching beyond Lord Warburton's beautiful appeal, reaching to something indefinable and possibly not commendable. In so far as the indefinable had an influence upon Isabel's behaviour at this juncture, it was not the conception, even unformulated, of a union with Caspar Goodwood; for however she might have resisted conquest at her English suitor's large quiet hands she was at least as far removed from the disposition to let the young man from Boston take positive possession of her. The sentiment in which she sought refuge after reading his letter was a critical view of his having come abroad; for it was part of the influence he had upon her that he seemed to deprive her of the sense of freedom. There was a disagreeably strong push, a kind of hardness of presence, in his way of rising before her.* She had been haunted at moments by the image, by the danger, of his disapproval and had wondered—a consideration she had never paid in equal degree to any one else—whether he would like what she did. The difficulty was that more than any man she had ever known, more than poor Lord Warburton (she had begun now to give his lordship the benefit of this epithet), Caspar Goodwood expressed for her an energy—and she had already felt it as a power—that was of his very nature. It was in no degree a matter of his 'advantages'—it was a matter of the spirit that sat in his clearburning eyes like some tireless watcher at a window. She might like it or not, but he insisted, ever, with his whole weight and force: even in one's usual contact with him one had to reckon with that. The idea of a diminished liberty was particularly disagreeable to her at present, since she had just given a sort of personal accent to her independence by looking so straight at Lord Warburton's big bribe and yet turning away from it. Sometimes Caspar Goodwood had seemed to range himself on the side of her destiny, to be the stubbornest fact she knew; she said to herself at such moments that she might evade him for a time, but that she must make terms with him at last—terms which would be certain to be favourable to himself. Her impulse had been to avail herself of the things that helped her to resist such an obligation; and this impulse had been much concerned in her eager acceptance of her aunt's invitation, which had come to her at an hour when she expected from day to day to see Mr Goodwood and when she was glad to have an answer ready for something she was sure he would say to her. When she had told him at Albany, on the evening of Mrs Touchett's visit, that she couldn't then discuss difficult questions, dazzled as she was by the great immediate opening of her aunt's offer of 'Europe,' he declared that this was no answer at all; and it was now to obtain a better one that he was following her across the sea. To say to herself that he was a kind of grim fate was well enough for a fanciful young woman who was able to take much for granted in him; but the reader has a right to a nearer and a clearer view.

He was the son of a proprietor of well-known cotton-mills in Massachusetts—a gentleman who had accumulated a considerable fortune in the exercise of this industry. Caspar at present managed the works, and with a judgement and a temper which, in spite of keen competition and languid years, had kept their prosperity from dwindling. He had received the better part of his education at Harvard College, where, however, he had gained renown rather as a gymnast and an oarsman than as a gleaner of more dispersed knowledge. Later on he had learned that the finer intelligence too could vault and pull and strain—might even, breaking the record, treat itself to rare exploits. He had thus discovered in himself a sharp eye for the mystery of mechanics, and had invented an improvement in the cotton-spinning process which was now largely used and was known by his name. You might have seen it in the newspapers in connection with this fruitful contrivance; assurance of which he had given to Isabel by showing her in the columns of the New York *Interviewer* an exhaustive article on the Goodwood patent—an article not prepared by Miss Stackpole, friendly as she had proved herself to his more sentimental interests. There were intricate, bristling things he rejoiced in; he liked to organise, to contend, to administer; he could make people work his will, believe in him, march before him and justify him. This was the art, as they said, of managing men—which rested, in him, further, on a bold though brooding ambition. It struck those who knew him

well that he might do greater things than carry on a cotton-factory; there was nothing cottony about Caspar Goodwood, and his friends took for granted that he would somehow and somewhere write himself in bigger letters. But it was as if something large and confused, something dark and ugly, would have to call upon him: he was not after all in harmony with mere smug peace and greed and gain, an order of things of which the vital breath was ubiquitous advertisement. It pleased Isabel to believe that he might have ridden, on a plunging steed, the whirlwind of a great war—a war like the Civil strife that had overdarkened her conscious childhood and his ripening youth.*

She liked at any rate this idea of his being by character and in fact a mover of men—liked it much better than some other points in his nature and aspect. She cared nothing for his cotton-mill—the Goodwood patent left her imagination absolutely cold. She wished him no ounce less of his manhood, but she sometimes thought he would be rather nicer if he looked, for instance, a little differently. His jaw was too square and set and his figure too straight and stiff: these things suggested a want of easy consonance with the deeper rhythms of life. Then she viewed with reserve a habit he had of dressing always in the same manner; it was not apparently that he wore the same clothes continually, for, on the contrary, his garments had a way of looking rather too new. But they all seemed of the same piece; the figure, the stuff, was so drearily usual. She had reminded herself more than once that this was a frivolous objection to a person of his importance; and then she had amended the rebuke by saying that it would be a frivolous objection only if she were in love with him. She was not in love with him and therefore might criticise his small defects as well as his great—which latter consisted in the collective reproach of his being too serious, or, rather, not of his being so, since one could never be, but certainly of his seeming so. He showed his appetites and designs too simply and artlessly; when one was alone with him he talked too much about the same subject, and when other people were present he talked too little about anything. And yet he was of supremely strong, clean make—which was so much: she saw the different fitted parts of him as she had seen, in museums and portraits, the different fitted parts of armoured warriors—in plates of steel handsomely inlaid with gold. It was very strange: where, ever, was any tangible link between her impression and her act? Caspar Goodwood had never corresponded to her idea of a delightful person, and she supposed that this was why he left her so harshly critical. When, however, Lord Warburton, who not only did correspond with it, but gave an extension to the term, appealed to her approval, she found herself still unsatisfied. It was certainly strange.

The sense of her incoherence was not a help to answering Mr Goodwood's letter, and Isabel determined to leave it a while unhonoured. If he had determined to persecute her he must take the consequences; foremost among which was his being left to perceive how little it charmed her that he should come down to Gardencourt. She was already liable to the incursions of one suitor at this place, and though it might be pleasant to be appreciated in opposite quarters there was a kind of grossness in entertaining two such passionate pleaders at once, even in a case where the entertainment should consist of dismissing them. She made no reply to Mr Goodwood; but at the end of three days she wrote to Lord Warburton, and the letter belongs to our history.

DEAR LORD WARBURTON—A great deal of earnest thought has not led me to change my mind about the suggestion you were so kind as to make me the other day. I am not, I am really and truly not, able to regard you in the light of a companion for life; or to think of your home—your various homes—as the settled seat of my existence. These things cannot be reasoned about, and I very earnestly entreat you not to return to the subject we discussed so exhaustively. We see our lives from our own point of view; that is the privilege of the weakest and humblest of us; and I shall never be able to see mine in the manner you proposed. Kindly let this suffice you, and do me the justice to believe that I have given your proposal the deeply respectful consideration it deserves. It is with this very great regard that I remain sincerely yours,

ISABEL ARCHER.

While the author of this missive was making up her mind to despatch it Henrietta Stackpole formed a resolve which was accompanied by no demur. She invited Ralph Touchett to take a walk with her in the garden, and when he had assented with that alacrity which seemed constantly to testify to his high expectations, she informed him that she had a favour to ask of him. It may be admitted that at this information the young man flinched; for we know that Miss Stackpole had struck him as apt to push an advantage. The alarm was unreasoned, however; for he was clear about the area of her indiscretion as little as advised of its vertical depth, and he made a very civil profession of the desire to serve her. He was afraid of her and presently told her so. 'When you look at me in a certain way my knees knock together, my faculties desert me; I'm filled with trepidation and I ask only for strength to execute your commands. You've an address that I've never encountered in any woman.'

‘Well,’ Henrietta replied good-humouredly, ‘if I had not known before that you were trying somehow to abash me I should know it now. Of course I’m easy game—I was brought up with such different customs and ideas. I’m not used to your arbitrary standards, and I’ve never been spoken to in America as you have spoken to me. If a gentleman conversing with me over there were to speak to me like that I shouldn’t know what to make of it. We take everything more naturally over there, and, after all, we’re a great deal more simple. I admit that; I’m very simple myself. Of course if you choose to laugh at me for it you’re very welcome; but I think on the whole I would rather be myself than you. I’m quite content to be myself; I don’t want to change. There are plenty of people that appreciate me just as I am. It’s true they’re nice fresh free-born Americans!’ Henrietta had lately taken up the tone of helpless innocence and large concession. ‘I want you to assist me a little,’ she went on. ‘I don’t care in the least whether I amuse you while you do so; or, rather, I’m perfectly willing your amusement should be your reward. I want you to help me about Isabel.’

‘Has she injured you?’ Ralph asked.

‘If she had I shouldn’t mind, and I should never tell you. What I’m afraid of is that she’ll injure herself.’

‘I think that’s very possible,’ said Ralph.

His companion stopped in the garden-walk, fixing on him perhaps the very gaze that unnerved him. ‘That too would amuse you, I suppose. The way you do things! I never heard any one so indifferent.’

‘To Isabel? Ah, not that!’

‘Well, you’re not in love with her, I hope.’

‘How can that be, when I’m in love with Another?’

‘You’re in love with yourself, that’s the Other!’ Miss Stackpole declared. ‘Much good may it do you! But if you wish to be serious once in your life here’s a chance; and if you really care for your cousin here’s an opportunity to prove it. I don’t expect you to understand her; that’s too much to ask. But you needn’t do that to grant my favour. I’ll supply the necessary intelligence.’

‘I shall enjoy that immensely!’ Ralph exclaimed. ‘I’ll be Caliban and you shall be Ariel.’*

‘You’re not at all like Caliban, because you’re sophisticated, and Caliban was not. But I’m not talking about imaginary characters; I’m talking about Isabel. Isabel’s intensely real. What I wish to tell you is that I find her fearfully changed.’

‘Since you came, do you mean?’

‘Since I came and before I came. She’s not the same as she once so beautifully was.’

‘As she was in America?’

‘Yes, in America. I suppose you know she comes from there. She can’t help it, but she does.’

‘Do you want to change her back again?’

‘Of course I do, and I want you to help me.’

‘Ah,’ said Ralph, ‘I’m only Caliban; I’m not Prospero.’

‘You were Prospero enough to make her what she has become. You’ve acted on Isabel Archer since she came here, Mr Touchett.’

‘I, my dear Miss Stackpole? Never in the world. Isabel Archer has acted on me—yes; she acts on every one. But I’ve been absolutely passive.’

‘You’re too passive then. You had better stir yourself and be careful. Isabel’s changing every day; she’s drifting away—right out to sea. I’ve watched her and I can see it. She’s not the bright American girl she was. She’s taking different views, a different colour, and turning away from her old ideals. I want to save those ideals, Mr Touchett, and that’s where you come in.’

‘Not surely as an ideal?’

‘Well, I hope not,’ Henrietta replied promptly. ‘I’ve got a fear in my heart that she’s going to marry one of these fell Europeans, and I want to prevent it.’

‘Ah, I see,’ cried Ralph; ‘and to prevent it you want me to step in and marry her?’

‘Not quite; that remedy would be as bad as the disease, for you’re the typical, the fell European from whom I wish to rescue her. No; I wish you to take an interest in another person—a young man to whom she once gave great encouragement and whom she now doesn’t seem to think good enough. He’s a thoroughly grand man and a very dear friend of mine, and I wish very much you would invite him to pay a visit here.’

Ralph was much puzzled by this appeal, and it is perhaps not to the credit of his purity of mind that

he failed to look at it at first in the simplest light. It wore, to his eyes, a tortuous air, and his fault was that he was not quite sure that anything in the world could really be as candid as this request of Miss Stackpole's appeared. That a young woman should demand that a gentleman whom she described as her very dear friend should be furnished with an opportunity to make himself agreeable to another young woman, a young woman whose attention had wandered and whose charms were greater—this was an anomaly which for the moment challenged all his ingenuity of interpretation. To read between the lines was easier than to follow the text, and to suppose that Miss Stackpole wished the gentleman invited to Gardencourt on her own account was the sign not so much of a vulgar as of an embarrassed mind. Even from this venial act of vulgarity, however, Ralph was saved, and saved by a force that I can only speak of as inspiration. With no more outward light on the subject than he already possessed he suddenly acquired the conviction that it would be a sovereign injustice to the correspondent of the *Interviewer* to assign a dishonourable motive to any act of hers. This conviction passed into his mind with extreme rapidity; it was perhaps kindled by the pure radiance of the young lady's imperturbable gaze. He returned this challenge a moment, consciously, resisting an inclination to frown as one frowns in the presence of larger luminaries. 'Who's the gentleman you speak of?'

'Mr Caspar Goodwood—of Boston. He has been extremely attentive to Isabel—just as devoted to her as he can live. He has followed her out here and he's at present in London. I don't know his address, but I guess I can obtain it.'

'I've never heard of him,' said Ralph.

'Well, I suppose you haven't heard of every one. I don't believe he has ever heard of you; but that's no reason why Isabel shouldn't marry him.'

Ralph gave a mild ambiguous laugh. 'What a rage you have for marrying people! Do you remember how you wanted to marry *me* the other day?'

'I've got over that. You don't know how to take such ideas. Mr Goodwood does, however; and that's what I like about him. He's a splendid man and a perfect gentleman, and Isabel knows it.'

'Is she very fond of him?'

'If she isn't she ought to be. He's simply wrapped up in her.'

'And you wish me to ask him here,' said Ralph reflectively.

'It would be an act of true hospitality.'

'Caspar Goodwood,' Ralph continued—'it's rather a striking name.'

'I don't care anything about his name. It might be Ezekiel Jenkins, and I should say the same. He's the only man I have ever seen whom I think worthy of Isabel.'

'You're a very devoted friend,' said Ralph.

'Of course I am. If you say that to pour scorn on me I don't care.'

'I don't say it to pour scorn on you; I'm very much struck with it.'

'You're more satiric than ever, but I advise you not to laugh at Mr Goodwood.'

'I assure you I'm very serious; you ought to understand that,' said Ralph.

In a moment his companion understood it. 'I believe you are; now you're too serious.'

'You're difficult to please.'

'Oh, you're very serious indeed. You won't invite Mr Goodwood.'

'I don't know,' said Ralph. 'I'm capable of strange things. Tell me a little about Mr Goodwood. What's he like?'

'He's just the opposite of you. He's at the head of a cottonfactory; a very fine one.'

'Has he pleasant manners?' asked Ralph.

'Splendid manners—in the American style.'

'Would he be an agreeable member of our little circle?'

'I don't think he'd care much about our little circle. He'd concentrate on Isabel.'

'And how would my cousin like that?'

'Very possibly not at all. But it will be good for her. It will call back her thoughts.'

'Call them back—from where?'

'From foreign parts and other unnatural places. Three months ago she gave Mr Goodwood every reason to suppose he was acceptable to her, and it's not worthy of Isabel to go back on a real friend simply because she has changed the scene. I've changed the scene too, and the effect of it has been to

make me care more for my old associations than ever. It's my belief that the sooner Isabel changes it back again the better. I know her well enough to know that she would never be truly happy over here, and I wish her to form some strong American tie that will act as a preservative.'

'Aren't you perhaps a little too much in a hurry?' Ralph enquired. 'Don't you think you ought to give her more of a chance in poor old England?'

'A chance to ruin her bright young life? One's never too much in a hurry to save a precious human creature from drowning.'

'As I understand it then,' said Ralph, 'you wish me to push Mr Goodwood overboard after her. Do you know,' he added, 'that I've never heard her mention his name?'

Henrietta gave a brilliant smile. 'I'm delighted to hear that; it proves how much she thinks of him.'

Ralph appeared to allow that there was a good deal in this, and he surrendered to thought while his companion watched him askance. 'If I should invite Mr Goodwood,' he finally said, 'it would be to quarrel with him.'

'Don't do that; he'd prove the better man.'

'You certainly are doing your best to make me hate him! I really don't think I can ask him. I should be afraid of being rude to him.'

'It's just as you please,' Henrietta returned. 'I had no idea you were in love with her yourself.'

'Do you really believe that?' the young man asked with lifted eyebrows.

'That's the most natural speech I've ever heard you make! Of course I believe it,' Miss Stackpole ingeniously said.

'Well,' Ralph concluded, 'to prove to you that you're wrong I'll invite him. It must be of course as a friend of yours.'

'It will not be as a friend of mine that he'll come; and it will not be to prove to me that I'm wrong that you'll ask him—but to prove it to yourself!'

These last words of Miss Stackpole's (on which the two presently separated) contained an amount of truth which Ralph Touchett was obliged to recognise; but it so far took the edge from too sharp a recognition that, in spite of his suspecting it would be rather more indiscreet to keep than to break his promise, he wrote Mr Goodwood a note of six lines, expressing the pleasure it would give Mr Touchett the elder that he should join a little party at Gardencourt, of which Miss Stackpole was a valued member. Having sent his letter (to the care of a banker whom Henrietta suggested) he waited in some suspense. He had heard this fresh formidable figure named for the first time; for when his mother had mentioned on her arrival that there was a story about the girl's having an 'admirer' at home, the idea had seemed deficient in reality and he had taken no pains to ask questions the answers to which would involve only the vague or the disagreeable. Now, however, the native admiration of which his cousin was the object had become more concrete; it took the form of a young man who had followed her to London, who was interested in a cotton-mill and had manners in the most splendid of the American styles. Ralph had two theories about this intervener. Either his passion was a sentimental fiction of Miss Stackpole's (there was always a sort of tacit understanding among women, born of the solidarity of the sex, that they should discover or invent lovers for each other), in which case he was not to be feared and would probably not accept the invitation; or else he would accept the invitation and in this event prove himself a creature too irrational to demand further consideration. The latter clause of Ralph's argument might have seemed incoherent; but it embodied his conviction that if Mr Goodwood were interested in Isabel in the serious manner described by Miss Stackpole he would not care to present himself at Gardencourt on a summons from the latter lady. 'On this supposition,' said Ralph, 'he must regard her as a thorn on the stem of his rose; as an intercessor he must find her wanting in tact.'

Two days after he had sent his invitation he received a very short note from Caspar Goodwood, thanking him for it, regretting that other engagements made a visit to Gardencourt impossible and presenting many compliments to Miss Stackpole. Ralph handed the note to Henrietta, who, when she had read it, exclaimed: 'Well, I never have heard of anything so stiff!'

'I'm afraid he doesn't care so much about my cousin as you suppose,' Ralph observed.

'No, it's not that; it's some subtler motive. His nature's very deep. But I'm determined to fathom it, and I shall write to him to know what he means.'

His refusal of Ralph's overtures was vaguely disconcerting; from the moment he declined to come to Gardencourt our friend began to think him of importance. He asked himself what it signified to him whether Isabel's admirers should be desperadoes or laggards; they were not rivals of his and were

perfectly welcome to act out their genius. Nevertheless he felt much curiosity as to the result of Miss Stackpole's promised enquiry into the causes of Mr Goodwood's stiffness—a curiosity for the present ungratified, inasmuch as when he asked her three days later if she had written to London she was obliged to confess she had written in vain. Mr Goodwood had not replied.

'I suppose he's thinking it over,' she said; 'he thinks everything over; he's not *really* at all impetuous. But I'm accustomed to having my letters answered the same day.' She presently proposed to Isabel, at all events, that they should make an excursion to London together. 'If I must tell the truth,' she observed, 'I'm not seeing much at this place, and I shouldn't think you were either. I've not even seen that aristocrat —what's his name?—Lord Washburton. He seems to let you severely alone.'

'Lord Warburton's coming to-morrow, I happen to know,' replied her friend, who had received a note from the master of Lockleigh in answer to her own letter. 'You'll have every opportunity of turning him inside out.'

'Well, he may do for one letter, but what's one letter when you want to write fifty? I've described all the scenery in this vicinity and raved about all the old women and donkeys. You may say what you please, scenery doesn't make a vital letter. I must go back to London and get some impressions of real life. I was there but three days before I came away, and that's hardly time to get in touch.'

As Isabel, on her journey from New York to Gardencourt, had seen even less of the British capital than this, it appeared a happy suggestion of Henrietta's that the two should go thither on a visit of pleasure. The idea struck Isabel as charming; she was curious of the thick detail of London, which had always loomed large and rich to her. They turned over their schemes together and indulged in visions of romantic hours. They would stay at some picturesque old inn—one of the inns described by Dickens—and drive over the town in those delightful hansoms. Henrietta was a literary woman, and the great advantage of being a literary woman was that you could go everywhere and do everything. They would dine at a coffee-house and go afterwards to the play; they would frequent the Abbey and the British Museum and find out where Doctor Johnson had lived, and Goldsmith and Addison.* Isabel grew eager and presently unveiled the bright vision to Ralph, who burst into a fit of laughter which scarce expressed the sympathy she had desired.

'It's a delightful plan,' he said. 'I advise you to go to the Duke's Head in Covent Garden, an easy, informal, old-fashioned place, and I'll have you put down at my club.'*

'Do you mean it's improper?' Isabel asked. 'Dear me, isn't anything proper here? With Henrietta surely I may go anywhere; she isn't hampered in that way. She has travelled over the whole American continent and can at least find her way about this minute island.'

'Ah then,' said Ralph, 'let me take advantage of her protection to go up to town as well. I may never have a chance to travel so safely!'

XIV

MISS STACKPOLE would have prepared to start immediately; but Isabel, as we have seen, had been notified that Lord Warburton would come again to Gardencourt, and she believed it her duty to remain there and see him. For four or five days he had made no response to her letter; then he had written, very briefly, to say he would come to luncheon two days later. There was something in these delays and postponements that touched the girl and renewed her sense of his desire to be considerate and patient, not to appear to urge her too grossly; a consideration the more studied that she was so sure he 'really liked' her. Isabel told her uncle she had written to him, mentioning also his intention of coming; and the old man, in consequence, left his room earlier than usual and made his appearance at the two o'clock repast. This was by no means an act of vigilance on his part, but the fruit of a benevolent belief that his being of the company might help to cover any conjoined straying away in case Isabel should give their noble visitor another hearing. That personage drove over from Lockleigh and brought the elder of his sisters with him, a measure presumably dictated by reflexions of the same order as Mr Touchett's. The two visitors were introduced to Miss Stackpole, who, at luncheon, occupied a seat adjoining Lord Warburton's. Isabel, who was nervous and had no relish for the prospect of again arguing the question he had so prematurely opened, could not help admiring his good-humoured selfpossession, which quite disguised the symptoms of that preoccupation with her presence it was natural she should suppose him to feel. He neither looked at her nor spoke to her, and the only sign of his emotion was that he avoided meeting her eyes. He had plenty of talk for the others, however, and he appeared to eat his luncheon with discrimination and appetite. Miss Molyneux, who had a smooth, nunlike forehead and wore a large silver cross suspended from her neck, was evidently preoccupied with Henrietta Stackpole, upon whom her eyes constantly rested in a manner suggesting a conflict between deep alienation and yearning wonder. Of the two ladies from Lockleigh she was the one Isabel had liked best; there was such a world of hereditary quiet in her. Isabel was sure moreover that her mild forehead and silver cross referred to some weird Anglican mystery —some delightful reinstitution perhaps of the quaint office of the canoness. She wondered what Miss Molyneux would think of her if she knew Miss Archer had refused her brother; and then she felt sure that Miss Molyneux would never know—that Lord Warburton never told her such things. He was fond of her and kind to her, but on the whole he told her little. Such, at least, was Isabel's theory; when, at table, she was not occupied in conversation she was usually occupied in forming theories about her neighbours. According to Isabel, if Miss Molyneux should ever learn what had passed between Miss Archer and Lord Warburton she would probably be shocked at such a girl's failure to rise; or no, rather (this was our heroine's last position) she would impute to the young American but a due consciousness of inequality.

Whatever Isabel might have made of her opportunities, at all events, Henrietta Stackpole was by no means disposed to neglect those in which she now found herself immersed. 'Do you know you're the first lord I've ever seen?' she said very promptly to her neighbour. 'I suppose you think I'm awfully benighted.'

'You've escaped seeing some very ugly men,' Lord Warburton answered, looking a trifle absently about the table.

'Are they very ugly? They try to make us believe in America that they're all handsome and magnificent and that they wear wonderful robes and crowns.'

'Ah, the robes and crowns are gone out of fashion,' said Lord Warburton, 'like your tomahawks and revolvers.'

'I'm sorry for that; I think an aristocracy ought to be splendid,' Henrietta declared. 'If it's not that, what is it?'

'Oh, you know, it isn't much, at the best,' her neighbour allowed. 'Won't you have a potato?'

'I don't care much for these European potatoes. I shouldn't know you from an ordinary American gentleman.'

'Do talk to me as if I *were* one,' said Lord Warburton. 'I don't see how you manage to get on without potatoes; you must find so few things to eat over here.'

Henrietta was silent a little; there was a chance he was not sincere. 'I've had hardly any appetite since I've been here,' she went on at last; 'so it doesn't much matter. I don't approve of *you*, you know; I feel as if I ought to tell you that.'

'Don't approve of me?'

‘Yes; I don’t suppose any one ever said such a thing to you before, did they? I don’t approve of lords as an institution. I think the world has got beyond them—far beyond.’

‘Oh, so do I. I don’t approve of myself in the least. Sometimes it comes over me—how I should object to myself if I were not myself, don’t you know? But that’s rather good, by the way—not to be vainglorious.’

‘Why don’t you give it up then?’ Miss Stackpole enquired.

‘Give up—a—?’ asked Lord Warburton, meeting her harsh inflexion with a very mellow one.

‘Give up being a lord.’

‘Oh, I’m so little of one! One would really forget all about it if you wretched Americans were not constantly reminding one. However, I do think of giving it up, the little there is left of it, one of these days.’

‘I should like to see you do it!’ Henrietta exclaimed rather grimly.

‘I’ll invite you to the ceremony; we’ll have a supper and a dance.’

‘Well,’ said Miss Stackpole, ‘I like to see all sides. I don’t approve of a privileged class, but I like to hear what they have to say for themselves.’

‘Mighty little, as you see!’

‘I should like to draw you out a little more,’ Henrietta continued. ‘But you’re always looking away. You’re afraid of meeting my eye. I see you want to escape me.’

‘No, I’m only looking for those despised potatoes.’

‘Please explain about that young lady—your sister—then. I don’t understand about her. Is she a Lady?’

‘She’s a capital good girl.’

‘I don’t like the way you say that—as if you wanted to change the subject. Is her position inferior to yours?’

‘We neither of us have any position to speak of; but she’s better off than I, because she has none of the bother.’

‘Yes, she doesn’t look as if she had much bother. I wish I had as little bother as that. You do produce quiet people over here, whatever else you may do.’

‘Ah, you see one takes life easily, on the whole,’ said Lord Warburton. ‘And then you know we’re very dull. Ah, we can be dull when we try!’

‘I should advise you to try something else. I shouldn’t know what to talk to your sister about; she looks so different. Is that silver cross a badge?’

‘A badge?’

‘A sign of rank.’

Lord Warburton’s glance had wandered a good deal, but at this it met the gaze of his neighbour. ‘Oh yes,’ he answered in a moment; ‘the women go in for those things. The silver cross is worn by the eldest daughters of Viscounts.’ Which was his harmless revenge for having occasionally had his credulity too easily engaged in America. After luncheon he proposed to Isabel to come into the gallery and look at the pictures; and though she knew he had seen the pictures twenty times she complied without criticising this pretext. Her conscience now was very easy; ever since she sent him her letter she had felt particularly light of spirit. He walked slowly to the end of the gallery, staring at its contents and saying nothing; and then he suddenly broke out: ‘I hoped you wouldn’t write to me that way.’

‘It was the only way, Lord Warburton,’ said the girl. ‘Do try and believe that.’

‘If I could believe it of course I should let you alone. But we can’t believe by willing it; and I confess I don’t understand. I could understand your disliking me; that I could understand well. But that you should admit you do—’

‘What have I admitted?’ Isabel interrupted, turning slightly pale.

‘That you think me a good fellow; isn’t that it?’ She said nothing, and he went on: ‘You don’t seem to have any reason, and that gives me a sense of injustice.’

‘I have a reason, Lord Warburton.’ She said it in a tone that made his heart contract.

‘I should like very much to know it.’

‘I’ll tell you some day when there’s more to show for it.’

‘Excuse my saying that in the mean time I must doubt of it.’

‘You make me very unhappy,’ said Isabel.

‘I’m not sorry for that; it may help you to know how I feel. Will you kindly answer me a question?’ Isabel made no audible assent, but he apparently saw in her eyes something that gave him courage to go on. ‘Do you prefer some one else?’

‘That’s a question I’d rather not answer.’

‘Ah, you *do* then!’ her suitor murmured with bitterness.

The bitterness touched her, and she cried out: ‘You’re mistaken! I don’t.’

He sat down on a bench, unceremoniously, doggedly, like a man in trouble; leaning his elbows on his knees and staring at the floor. ‘I can’t even be glad of that,’ he said at last, throwing himself back against the wall; ‘for that would be an excuse.’

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. ‘An excuse? Must I excuse myself?’

He paid, however, no answer to the question. Another idea had come into his head. ‘Is it my political opinions? Do you think I go too far?’

‘I can’t object to your political opinions, because I don’t understand them.’

‘You don’t care what I think!’ he cried, getting up. ‘It’s all the same to you.’

Isabel walked to the other side of the gallery and stood there showing him her charming back, her light slim figure, the length of her white neck as she bent her head, and the density of her dark braids. She stopped in front of a small picture as if for the purpose of examining it; and there was something so young and free in her movement that her very pliancy seemed to mock at him. Her eyes, however, saw nothing; they had suddenly been suffused with tears. In a moment he followed her, and by this time she had brushed her tears away; but when she turned round her face was pale and the expression of her eyes strange. ‘That reason that I wouldn’t tell you—I’ll tell it you after all. It’s that I can’t escape my fate.’

‘Your fate?’

‘I should try to escape it if I were to marry you.’

‘I don’t understand. Why should not *that* be your fate as well as anything else?’

‘Because it’s not,’ said Isabel femininely. ‘I know it’s not. It’s not my fate to give up—I know it can’t be.’

Poor Lord Warburton stared, an interrogative point in either eye. ‘Do you call marrying *me* giving up?’

‘Not in the usual sense. It’s getting—getting—getting a great deal. But it’s giving up other chances.’

‘Other chances for what?’

‘I don’t mean chances to marry,’ said Isabel, her colour quickly coming back to her. And then she stopped, looking down with a deep frown, as if it were hopeless to attempt to make her meaning clear.

‘I don’t think it presumptuous in me to suggest that you’ll gain more than you’ll lose,’ her companion observed.

‘I can’t escape unhappiness,’ said Isabel. ‘In marrying you I shall be trying to.’

‘I don’t know whether you’d try to, but you certainly would: that I must in candour admit!’ he exclaimed with an anxious laugh.

‘I mustn’t—I can’t!’ cried the girl.

‘Well, if you’re bent on being miserable I don’t see why you should make *me* so. Whatever charms a life of misery may have for you, it has none for me.’

‘I’m not bent on a life of misery,’ said Isabel. ‘I’ve always been intensely determined to be happy, and I’ve often believed I should be. I’ve told people that; you can ask them. But it comes over me every now and then that I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning away, by separating myself.’

‘By separating yourself from what?’

‘From life. From the usual chances and dangers, from what most people know and suffer.’

Lord Warburton broke into a smile that almost denoted hope. ‘Why, my dear Miss Archer,’ he began to explain with the most considerate eagerness, ‘I don’t offer you any exoneration from life or from any chances or dangers whatever. I wish I could; depend upon it I would! For what do you take me, pray? Heaven help me, I’m not the Emperor of China! All I offer you is the chance of taking the common lot in a comfortable sort of way. The common lot? Why, I’m devoted to the common lot! Strike an alliance with me, and I promise you that you shall have plenty of it. You shall separate from nothing whatever—not even from your friend Miss Stackpole.’

‘She’d never approve of it,’ said Isabel, trying to smile and take advantage of this side-issue; despising herself too, not a little, for doing so.

‘Are we speaking of Miss Stackpole?’ his lordship asked impatiently. ‘I never saw a person judge

things on such theoretic grounds.'

'Now I suppose you're speaking of me,' said Isabel with humility; and she turned away again, for she saw Miss Molyneux enter the gallery, accompanied by Henrietta and by Ralph.

Lord Warburton's sister addressed him with a certain timidity and reminded him she ought to return home in time for tea, as she was expecting company to partake of it. He made no answer—apparently not having heard her; he was preoccupied, and with good reason. Miss Molyneux—as if he had been Royalty—stood like a lady-in-waiting.

'Well, I never, Miss Molyneux!' said Henrietta Stackpole. 'If I wanted to go he'd have to go. If I wanted my brother to do a thing he'd have to do it.'

'Oh, Warburton does everything one wants,' Miss Molyneux answered with a quick, shy laugh. 'How very many pictures you have!' she went on, turning to Ralph.

'They look a good many, because they're all put together,' said Ralph. 'But it's really a bad way.'

'Oh, I think it's so nice. I wish we had a gallery at Lockleigh. I'm so very fond of pictures,' Miss Molyneux went on, persistently, to Ralph, as if she were afraid Miss Stackpole would address her again. Henrietta appeared at once to fascinate and to frighten her.

'Ah yes, pictures are very convenient,' said Ralph, who appeared to know better what style of reflexion was acceptable to her.

'They're so very pleasant when it rains,' the young lady continued. 'It has rained of late so very often.'

'I'm sorry you're going away, Lord Warburton,' said Henrietta. 'I wanted to get a great deal more out of you.'

'I'm not going away,' Lord Warburton answered.

'Your sister says you must. In America the gentlemen obey the ladies.'

'I'm afraid we have some people to tea,' said Miss Molyneux, looking at her brother.

'Very good, my dear. We'll go.'

'I hoped you would resist!' Henrietta exclaimed. 'I wanted to see what Miss Molyneux would do.'

'I never do anything,' said this young lady.

'I suppose in your position it's sufficient for you to exist!' Miss Stackpole returned. 'I should like very much to see you at home.'

'You must come to Lockleigh again,' said Miss Molyneux, very sweetly, to Isabel, ignoring this remark of Isabel's friend.

Isabel looked into her quiet eyes a moment, and for that moment seemed to see in their grey depths the reflexion of everything she had rejected in rejecting Lord Warburton—the peace, the kindness, the honour, the possessions, a deep security and a great exclusion. She kissed Miss Molyneux and then she said: 'I'm afraid I can never come again.'

'Never again?'

'I'm afraid I'm going away.'

'Oh, I'm so very sorry,' said Miss Molyneux. 'I think that's so very wrong of you.'

Lord Warburton watched this little passage; then he turned away and stared at a picture. Ralph, leaning against the rail before the picture with his hands in his pockets, had for the moment been watching him.

'I should like to see you at home,' said Henrietta, whom Lord Warburton found beside him. 'I should like an hour's talk with you; there are a great many questions I wish to ask you.'

'I shall be delighted to see you,' the proprietor of Lockleigh answered; 'but I'm certain not to be able to answer many of your questions. When will you come?'

'Whenever Miss Archer will take me. We're thinking of going to London, but we'll go and see you first. I'm determined to get some satisfaction out of you.'

'If it depends upon Miss Archer I'm afraid you won't get much. She won't come to Lockleigh; she doesn't like the place.'

'She told me it was lovely!' said Henrietta.

Lord Warburton hesitated. 'She won't come, all the same. You had better come alone,' he added.

Henrietta straightened herself, and her large eyes expanded. 'Would you make that remark to an English lady?' she enquired with soft asperity.

Lord Warburton stared. 'Yes, if I liked her enough.'

‘You’d be careful not to like her enough. If Miss Archer won’t visit your place again it’s because she doesn’t want to take me. I know what she thinks of me, and I suppose you think the same—that I oughtn’t to bring in individuals.’ Lord Warburton was at a loss; he had not been made acquainted with Miss Stackpole’s professional character and failed to catch her allusion. ‘Miss Archer has been warning you!’ she therefore went on.

‘Warning me?’

‘Isn’t that why she came off alone with you here—to put you on your guard?’

‘Oh dear, no,’ said Lord Warburton brazenly; ‘our talk had no such solemn character as that.’

‘Well, you’ve been on your guard—intensely. I suppose it’s natural to you; that’s just what I wanted to observe. And so, too, Miss Molyneux—she wouldn’t commit herself. *You* have been warned, anyway,’ Henrietta continued, addressing this young lady; ‘but for you it wasn’t necessary.’

‘I hope not,’ said Miss Molyneux vaguely.

‘Miss Stackpole takes notes,’ Ralph soothingly explained. ‘She’s a great satirist; she sees through us all and she works us up.’

‘Well, I must say I never have had such a collection of bad material!’ Henrietta declared, looking from Isabel to Lord Warburton and from this nobleman to his sister and to Ralph. ‘There’s something the matter with you all; you’re as dismal as if you had got a bad cable.’

‘You do see through us, Miss Stackpole,’ said Ralph in a low tone, giving her a little intelligent nod as he led the party out of the gallery. ‘There’s something the matter with us all.’

Isabel came behind these two; Miss Molyneux, who decidedly liked her immensely, had taken her arm, to walk beside her over the polished floor. Lord Warburton strolled on the other side with his hands behind him and his eyes lowered. For some moments he said nothing; and then, ‘Is it true you’re going to London?’ he asked.

‘I believe it has been arranged.’

‘And when shall you come back?’

‘In a few days; but probably for a very short time. I’m going to Paris with my aunt.’

‘When, then, shall I see you again?’

‘Not for a good while,’ said Isabel. ‘But some day or other, I hope.’

‘Do you really hope it?’

‘Very much.’

He went a few steps in silence; then he stopped and put out his hand. ‘Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ said Isabel.

Miss Molyneux kissed her again, and she let the two depart. After it, without rejoining Henrietta and Ralph, she retreated to her own room; in which apartment, before dinner, she was found by Mrs Touchett, who had stopped on her way to the saloon. ‘I may as well tell you,’ said that lady, ‘that your uncle has informed me of your relations with Lord Warburton.’

Isabel considered. ‘Relations? They’re hardly relations. That’s the strange part of it: he has seen me but three or four times.’

‘Why did you tell your uncle rather than me?’ Mrs Touchett dispassionately asked.

Again the girl hesitated. ‘Because he knows Lord Warburton better.’

‘Yes, but I know you better.’

‘I’m not sure of that,’ said Isabel, smiling.

‘Neither am I, after all; especially when you give me that rather conceited look. One would think you were awfully pleased with yourself and had carried off a prize! I suppose that when you refuse an offer like Lord Warburton’s it’s because you expect to do something better.’

‘Ah, my uncle didn’t say that!’ cried Isabel, smiling still.

XV

IT had been arranged that the two young ladies should proceed to London under Ralph's escort, though Mrs Touchett looked with little favour on the plan. It was just the sort of plan, she said, that Miss Stackpole would be sure to suggest, and she enquired if the correspondent of the *Interviewer* was to take the party to stay at a boarding-house.

'I don't care where she takes us to stay, so long as there's local colour,' said Isabel. 'That's what we're going to London for.'

'I suppose that after a girl has refused an English lord she may do anything,' her aunt rejoined. 'After that one needn't stand on trifles.'

'Should you have liked me to marry Lord Warburton?' Isabel enquired.

'Of course I should.'

'I thought you disliked the English so much.'

'So I do; but it's all the greater reason for making use of them.'

'Is that your idea of marriage?' And Isabel ventured to add that her aunt appeared to her to have made very little use of Mr Touchett.

'Your uncle's not an English nobleman,' said Mrs Touchett, 'though even if he had been I should still probably have taken up my residence in Florence.'

'Do you think Lord Warburton could make me any better than I am?' the girl asked with some animation. 'I don't mean I'm too good to improve. I mean—I mean that I don't love Lord Warburton enough to marry him.'

'You did right to refuse him then,' said Mrs Touchett in her smallest, sparest voice. 'Only, the next great offer you get, I hope you'll manage to come up to your standard.'

'We had better wait till the offer comes before we talk about it. I hope very much I may have no more offers for the present. They upset me completely.'

'You probably won't be troubled with them if you adopt permanently the Bohemian manner* of life. However, I've promised Ralph not to criticise.'

'I'll do whatever Ralph says is right,' Isabel returned. 'I've unbounded confidence in Ralph.'

'His mother's much obliged to you!' this lady dryly laughed.

'It seems to me indeed she ought to feel it!' Isabel irrepressibly answered.

Ralph had assured her that there would be no violation of decency in their paying a visit—the little party of three—to the sights of the metropolis; but Mrs Touchett took a different view. Like many ladies of her country who had lived a long time in Europe, she had completely lost her native tact on such points, and in her reaction, not in itself deplorable, against the liberty allowed to young persons beyond the seas, had fallen into gratuitous and exaggerated scruples. Ralph accompanied their visitors to town and established them at a quiet inn in a street that ran at right angles to Piccadilly.* His first idea had been to take them to his father's house in Winchester Square, a large, dull mansion which at this period of the year was shrouded in silence and brown holland; but he bethought himself that, the cook being at Gardencourt, there was no one in the house to get them their meals, and Pratt's Hotel accordingly became their resting-place. Ralph, on his side, found quarters in Winchester Square, having a 'den' there of which he was very fond and being familiar with deeper fears than that of a cold kitchen. He availed himself largely indeed of the resources of Pratt's Hotel, beginning his day with an early visit to his fellow travellers, who had Mr Pratt in person, in a large bulging white waistcoat, to remove their dishcovers. Ralph turned up, as he said, after breakfast, and the little party made out a scheme of entertainment for the day. As London wears in the month of September* a face blank but for its smears of prior service, the young man, who occasionally took an apologetic tone, was obliged to remind his companion, to Miss Stackpole's high derision, that there wasn't a creature in town.

'I suppose you mean the aristocracy are absent,' Henrietta answered; 'but I don't think you could have a better proof that if they were absent altogether they wouldn't be missed. It seems to me the place is about as full as it can be. There's no one here, of course, but three or four millions of people. What is it you call them—the lower-middle class? They're only the population of London, and that's of no consequence.'

Ralph declared that for him the aristocracy left no void that Miss Stackpole herself didn't fill, and that a more contented man was nowhere at that moment to be found. In this he spoke the truth, for the stale September days, in the huge half-empty town, had a charm wrapped in them as a coloured gem might be wrapped in a dusty cloth. When he went home at night to the empty house in Winchester Square, after a chain of hours with his comparatively ardent friends, he wandered into the big dusky dining-room, where the candle he took from the hall-table, after letting himself in, constituted the only illumination. The square was still, the house was still; when he raised one of the windows of the dining-room to let in the air he heard the slow creak of the boots of a lone constable. His own step, in the empty place, seemed loud and sonorous; some of the carpets had been raised, and whenever he moved he roused a melancholy echo. He sat down in one of the armchairs; the big dark dining table twinkled here and there in the small candle-light; the pictures on the wall, all of them very brown, looked vague and incoherent. There was a ghostly presence as of dinners long since digested, of table-talk that had lost its actuality. This hint of the supernatural* perhaps had something to do with the fact that his imagination took a flight and that he remained in his chair a long time beyond the hour at which he should have been in bed; doing nothing, not even reading the evening paper. I say he did nothing, and I maintain the phrase in the face of the fact that he thought at these moments of Isabel. To think of Isabel could only be for him an idle pursuit, leading to nothing and profiting little to any one. His cousin had not yet seemed to him so charming as during these days spent in sounding, touristfashion, the deeps and shallows of the metropolitan element. Isabel was full of premises, conclusions, emotions; if she had come in search of local colour she found it everywhere. She asked more questions than he could answer, and launched brave theories, as to historic cause and social effect, that he was equally unable to accept or to refute. The party went more than once to the British Museum and to that brighter palace of art* which reclaims for antique variety so large an area of a monotonous suburb; they spent a morning in the Abbey and went on a penny-steamer to the Tower; they looked at pictures both in public and private collections and sat on various occasions beneath the great trees in Kensington Gardens. Henrietta proved an indestructible sight-seer and a more lenient judge than Ralph had ventured to hope. She had indeed many disappointments, and London at large suffered from her vivid remembrance of the strong points of the American civic idea; but she made the best of its dingy dignities and only heaved an occasional sigh and uttered a desultory 'Well!' which led no further and lost itself in retrospect. The truth was that, as she said herself, she was not in her element. 'I've not a sympathy with inanimate objects,' she remarked to Isabel at the National Gallery; and she continued to suffer from the meagreness of the glimpse that had as yet been vouchsafed to her of the inner life. Landscapes by Turner and Assyrian bulls were a poor substitute for the literary dinner-parties at which she had hoped to meet the genius and renown of Great Britain.

'Where are your public men, where are your men and women of intellect?' she enquired of Ralph, standing in the middle of Trafalgar Square as if she had supposed this to be a place where she would naturally meet a few. 'That's one of them on the top of the column, you say—Lord Nelson? Was he a lord too? Wasn't he high enough, that they had to stick him a hundred feet in the air? That's the past—I don't care about the past; I want to see some of the leading minds of the present. I won't say of the future, because I don't believe much in your future.' Poor Ralph had few leading minds among his acquaintance and rarely enjoyed the pleasure of buttonholing a celebrity; a state of things which appeared to Miss Stackpole to indicate a deplorable want of enterprise. 'If I were on the other side I should call,' she said, 'and tell the gentleman, whoever he might be, that I had heard a great deal about him and had come to see for myself. But I gather from what you say that this is not the custom here. You seem to have plenty of meaningless customs, but none of those that would help along. We *are* in advance, certainly. I suppose I shall have to give up the social side altogether'; and Henrietta, though she went about with her guidebook and pencil and wrote a letter to the *Interviewer* about the Tower (in which she described the execution of Lady Jane Grey*), had a sad sense of falling below her mission.

The incident that had preceded Isabel's departure from Gardencourt left a painful trace in our young woman's mind: when she felt again in her face, as from a recurrent wave, the cold breath of her last suitor's surprise, she could only muffle her head till the air cleared. She could not have done less than what she did; this was certainly true. But her necessity, all the same, had been as graceless as some physical act in a strained attitude, and she felt no desire to take credit for her conduct. Mixed with this imperfect pride, nevertheless, was a feeling of freedom which in itself was sweet and which, as she wandered through the great city with her ill-matched companions, occasionally throbbed into odd demonstrations. When she walked in Kensington Gardens she stopped the children (mainly of the poorer sort) whom she saw playing on the grass; she asked them their names and gave them sixpence and, when they were pretty, kissed them. Ralph noticed these quaint charities; he noticed everything she did. One afternoon, that his companions might pass the time, he invited them to tea in Winchester Square, and he

had the house set in order as much as possible for their visit. There was another guest to meet them, an amiable bachelor, an old friend of Ralph's who happened to be in town and for whom prompt commerce with Miss Stackpole appeared to have neither difficulty nor dread. Mr Bantling, a stout, sleek, smiling man of forty, wonderfully dressed, universally informed and incoherently amused, laughed immoderately at everything Henrietta said, gave her several cups of tea, examined in her society the *bric–à–brac*, of which Ralph had a considerable collection, and afterwards, when the host proposed they should go out into the square and pretend it was a *fête-champêtre*,* walked round the limited enclosure several times with her and, at a dozen turns of their talk, bounded responsive—as with a positive passion for argument—to her remarks upon the inner life.

'Oh, I see; I dare say you found it very quiet at Gardencourt. Naturally there's not much going on there when there's such a lot of illness about. Touchett's very bad, you know; the doctors have forbidden his being in England at all, and he has only come back to take care of his father. The old man, I believe, has half a dozen things the matter with him. They call it gout, but to my certain knowledge he has organic disease so developed that you may depend upon it he'll go, some day soon, quite quickly. Of course that sort of thing makes a dreadfully dull house; I wonder they have people when they can do so little for them. Then I believe Mr Touchett's always squabbling with his wife; she lives away from her husband, you know, in that extraordinary American way of yours. If you want a house where there's always something going on, I recommend you to go down and stay with my sister, Lady Pensil, in Bedfordshire. I'll write to her tomorrow and I'm sure she'll be delighted to ask you. I know just what you want—you want a house where they go in for theatricals and picnics and that sort of thing. My sister's just that sort of woman; she's always getting up something or other and she's always glad to have the sort of people who help her. I'm sure she'll ask you down by return of post: she's tremendously fond of distinguished people and writers. She writes herself, you know; but I haven't read everything she has written. It's usually poetry, and I don't go in much for poetry—unless it's Byron.* I suppose you think a great deal of Byron in America,' Mr Bantling continued, expanding in the stimulating air of Miss Stackpole's attention, bringing up his sequences promptly and changing his topic with an easy turn of hand. Yet he none the less gracefully kept in sight of the idea, dazzling to Henrietta, of her going to stay with Lady Pensil in Bedfordshire. 'I understand what you want; you want to see some genuine English sport. The Touchetts aren't English at all, you know; they have their own habits, their own language, their own food—some odd religion even, I believe, of their own. The old man thinks it's wicked to hunt, I'm told. You must get down to my sister's in time for the theatricals, and I'm sure she'll be glad to give you a part. I'm sure you act well; I know you're very clever. My sister's forty years old and has seven children, but she's going to play the principal part. Plain as she is she makes up awfully well—I *will* say for her. Of course you needn't act if you don't want to.'

In this manner Mr Bantling delivered himself while they strolled over the grass in Winchester Square, which, although it had been peppered by the London soot, invited the tread to linger. Henrietta thought her blooming, easy-voiced bachelor, with his impressibility to feminine merit and his splendid range of suggestion, a very agreeable man, and she valued the opportunity he offered her. 'I don't know but I *would* go, if your sister should ask me. I think it would be my duty. What do you call her name?'

'Pensil. It's an odd name, but it isn't a bad one.'

'I think one name's as good as another. But what's her rank?'

'Oh, she's a baron's wife; a convenient sort of rank. You're fine enough and you're not too fine.'

'I don't know but what she'd be too fine for me. What do you call the place she lives in—Bedfordshire?'

'She lives away in the northern corner of it. It's a tiresome country, but I dare say you won't mind it. I'll try and run down while you're there.'

All this was very pleasant to Miss Stackpole, and she was sorry to be obliged to separate from Lady Pensil's obliging brother. But it happened that she had met the day before, in Piccadilly, some friends whom she had not seen for a year: the Miss Climbers, two ladies from Wilmington, Delaware, who had been travelling on the Continent and were now preparing to re-embark. Henrietta had had a long interview with them on the Piccadilly pavement, and though the three ladies all talked at once they had not exhausted their store. It had been agreed therefore that Henrietta should come and dine with them in their lodgings in Jermyn Street* at six o'clock on the morrow, and she now bethought herself of this engagement. She prepared to start for Jermyn Street, taking leave first of Ralph Touchett and Isabel, who, seated on garden chairs in another part of the enclosure, were occupied—if the term may be used—with an exchange of amenities less pointed than the practical colloquy of Miss Stackpole and Mr Bantling. When it had been settled between Isabel and her friend that they should be reunited at some reputable

hour at Pratt's Hotel, Ralph remarked that the latter must have a cab. She couldn't walk all the way to Jermyn Street.

'I suppose you mean it's improper for me to walk alone!' Henrietta exclaimed. 'Merciful powers, have I come to this?'

'There's not the slightest need of your walking alone,' Mr Bantling gaily interposed. 'I should be greatly pleased to go with you.'

'I simply meant that you'd be late for dinner,' Ralph returned. 'Those poor ladies may easily believe that we refuse, at the last, to spare you.'

'You had better have a hansom, Henrietta,' said Isabel.

'I'll get you a hansom if you'll trust me,' Mr Bantling went on. 'We might walk a little till we meet one.'

'I don't see why I shouldn't trust him, do you?' Henrietta enquired of Isabel.

'I don't see what Mr Bantling could do to you,' Isabel obligingly answered; 'but, if you like, we'll walk with you till you find your cab.'

'Never mind; we'll go alone. Come on, Mr Bantling, and take care you get me a good one.'

Mr Bantling promised to do his best, and the two took their departure, leaving the girl and her cousin together in the square, over which a clear September twilight had now begun to gather. It was perfectly still; the wide quadrangle of dusky houses showed lights in none of the windows, where the shutters and blinds were closed; the pavements were a vacant expanse, and, putting aside two small children from a neighbouring slum, who, attracted by symptoms of abnormal animation in the interior, poked their faces between the rusty rails of the enclosure, the most vivid object within sight was the big red pillar-post on the southeast corner.

'Henrietta will ask him to get into the cab and go with her to Jermyn Street,' Ralph observed. He always spoke of Miss Stackpole as Henrietta.

'Very possibly,' said his companion.

'Or rather, no, she won't,' he went on. 'But Bantling will ask leave to get in.'

'Very likely again. I'm very glad they're such good friends.'

'She has made a conquest. He thinks her a brilliant woman. It may go far,' said Ralph.

Isabel was briefly silent. 'I call Henrietta a very brilliant woman, but I don't think it will go far. They would never really know each other. He has not the least idea what she really is, and she has no just comprehension of Mr Bantling.'

'There's no more usual basis of union than a mutual misunderstanding. But it ought not to be so difficult to understand Bob Bantling,' Ralph added. 'He is a very simple organism.'

'Yes, but Henrietta's a simpler one still. And, pray, what am I to do?' Isabel asked, looking about her through the fading light, in which the limited landscape-gardening of the square took on a large and effective appearance. 'I don't imagine that you'll propose that you and I, for our amusement, shall drive about London in a hansom.'

'There's no reason we shouldn't stay here—if you don't dislike it. It's very warm; there will be half an hour yet before dark; and if you permit it I'll light a cigarette.'

'You may do what you please,' said Isabel, 'if you'll amuse me till seven o'clock. I propose at that hour to go back and partake of a simple and solitary repast—two poached eggs and a muffin—at Pratt's Hotel.'

'Mayn't I dine with you?' Ralph asked.

'No, you'll dine at your club.'

They had wandered back to their chairs in the centre of the square again, and Ralph had lighted his cigarette. It would have given him extreme pleasure to be present in person at the modest little feast she had sketched; but in default of this he liked even being forbidden. For the moment, however, he liked immensely being alone with her, in the thickening dusk, in the centre of the multitudinous town; it made her seem to depend upon him and to be in his power. This power he could exert but vaguely; the best exercise of it was to accept her decisions submissively—which indeed there was already an emotion in doing. 'Why won't you let me dine with you?' he demanded after a pause.

'Because I don't care for it.'

'I suppose you're tired of me.'

'I shall be an hour hence. You see I have the gift of foreknowledge.'

'Oh, I shall be delightful meanwhile,' said Ralph. But he said nothing more, and as she made no

rejoinder they sat some time in a stillness which seemed to contradict his promise of entertainment. It seemed to him she was preoccupied, and he wondered what she was thinking about; there were two or three very possible subjects. At last he spoke again. ‘Is your objection to my society this evening caused by your expectation of another visitor?’

She turned her head with a glance of her clear, fair eyes. ‘Another visitor? What visitor should I have?’

He had none to suggest; which made his question seem to himself silly as well as brutal. ‘You’ve a great many friends that I don’t know. You’ve a whole past from which I was perversely excluded.’

‘You were reserved for my future. You must remember that my past is over there across the water. There’s none of it here in London.’

‘Very good, then, since your future is seated beside you. Capital thing to have your future so handy.’ And Ralph lighted another cigarette and reflected that Isabel probably meant she had received news that Mr Caspar Goodwood had crossed to Paris. After he had lighted his cigarette he puffed it a while, and then he resumed. ‘I promised just now to be very amusing; but you see I don’t come up to the mark, and the fact is there’s a good deal of temerity in one’s undertaking to amuse a person like you. What do you care for my feeble attempts? You’ve grand ideas—you’ve a high standard in such matters. I ought at least to bring in a band of music or a company of mountebanks.’

‘One mountebank’s enough, and you do very well. Pray go on, and in another ten minutes I shall begin to laugh.’

‘I assure you I’m very serious,’ said Ralph. ‘You do really ask a great deal.’

‘I don’t know what you mean. I ask nothing!’

‘You accept nothing,’ said Ralph. She coloured, and now suddenly it seemed to her that she guessed his meaning. But why should he speak to her of such things? He hesitated a little and then he continued: ‘There’s something I should like very much to say to you. It’s a question I wish to ask. It seems to me I’ve a right to ask it, because I’ve a kind of interest in the answer.’

‘Ask what you will,’ Isabel replied gently, ‘and I’ll try to satisfy you.’

‘Well then, I hope you won’t mind my saying that Warburton has told me of something that has passed between you.’

Isabel suppressed a start; she sat looking at her open fan. ‘Very good; I suppose it was natural he should tell you.’

‘I have his leave to let you know he has done so. He has some hope still,’ said Ralph.

‘Still?’

‘He had it a few days ago.’

‘I don’t believe he has any now,’ said the girl.

‘I’m very sorry for him then; he’s such an honest man.’

‘Pray, did he ask you to talk to me?’

‘No, not that. But he told me because he couldn’t help it. We’re old friends, and he was greatly disappointed. He sent me a line asking me to come and see him, and I drove over to Lockleigh the day before he and his sister lunched with us. He was very heavyhearted; he had just got a letter from you.’

‘Did he show you the letter?’ asked Isabel with momentary loftiness.

‘By no means. But he told me it was a neat refusal. I was very sorry for him,’ Ralph repeated.

For some moments Isabel said nothing; then at last, ‘Do you know how often he had seen me?’ she enquired. ‘Five or six times.’

‘That’s to your glory.’

‘It’s not for that I say it.’

‘What then do you say it for? Not to prove that poor Warburton’s state of mind’s superficial, because I’m pretty sure you don’t think that.’

Isabel certainly was unable to say she thought it; but presently she said something else. ‘If you’ve not been requested by Lord Warburton to argue with me, then you’re doing it disinterestedly—or for the love of argument.’

‘I’ve no wish to argue with you at all. I only wish to leave you alone. I’m simply greatly interested in your own sentiments.’

‘I’m greatly obliged to you!’ cried Isabel with a slightly nervous laugh.

‘Of course you mean that I’m meddling in what doesn’t concern me. But why shouldn’t I speak to you

of this matter without annoying you or embarrassing myself? What's the use of being your cousin if I can't have a few privileges? What's the use of adoring you without hope of a reward if I can't have a few compensations? What's the use of being ill and disabled and restricted to mere spectatorship at the game of life if I really can't see the show when I've paid so much for my ticket? Tell me this,' Ralph went on while she listened to him with quickened attention. 'What had you in mind when you refused Lord Warburton?'

'What had I in mind?'

'What was the logic—the view of your situation—that dictated so remarkable an act?'

'I didn't wish to marry him—if that's logic.'

'No, that's not logic—and I knew that before. It's really nothing, you know. What was it you *said* to yourself? You certainly said more than that?'

Isabel reflected a moment, then answered with a question of her own. 'Why do you call it a remarkable act? That's what your mother thinks too.'

'Warburton's such a thorough good sort; as a man, I consider he has hardly a fault. And then he's what they call here no end of a swell. He has immense possessions, and his wife would be thought a superior being. He unites the intrinsic and the extrinsic advantages.'

Isabel watched her cousin as to see how far he would go. 'I refused him because he was too perfect then. I'm not perfect myself, and he's too good for me. Besides, his perfection would irritate me.'

'That's ingenious rather than candid,' said Ralph. 'As a fact you think nothing in the world too perfect for you.'

'Do you think I'm so good?'

'No, but you're exacting, all the same, without the excuse of thinking yourself good. Nineteen women out of twenty, however, even of the most exacting sort, would have managed to do with Warburton. Perhaps you don't know how he has been stalked.'

'I don't wish to know. But it seems to me,' said Isabel, 'that one day when we talked of him you mentioned odd things in him.'

Ralph smokingly considered. 'I hope that what I said then had no weight with you; for they were not faults, the things I spoke of: they were simply peculiarities of his position. If I had known he wished to marry you I'd never have alluded to them. I think I said that as regards that position he was rather a sceptic. It would have been in your power to make him a believer.'

'I think not. I don't understand the matter, and I'm not conscious of any mission of that sort. You're evidently disappointed,' Isabel added, looking at her cousin with rueful gentleness. 'You'd have liked me to make such a marriage.'

'Not in the least. I'm absolutely without a wish on the subject. I don't pretend to advise you, and I content myself with watching you—with the deepest interest.'

She gave rather a conscious sigh. 'I wish I could be as interesting to myself as I am to you!'

'There you're not candid again; you're extremely interesting to yourself. Do you know, however,' said Ralph, 'that if you've really given Warburton his final answer I'm rather glad it has been what it was. I don't mean I'm glad for you, and still less of course for him. I'm glad for myself.'

'Are *you* thinking of proposing to me?'

'By no means. From the point of view I speak of that would be fatal; I should kill the goose that supplies me with the material of my inimitable omelettes. I use that animal as the symbol of my insane illusions. What I mean is that I shall have the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won't marry Lord Warburton.'

'That's what your mother counts upon too,' said Isabel.

'Ah, there will be plenty of spectators! We shall hang on the rest of your career. I shall not see all of it, but I shall probably see the most interesting years. Of course if you were to marry our friend you'd still have a career—a very decent, in fact a very brilliant one. But relatively speaking it would be a little prosaic. It would be definitely marked out in advance; it would be wanting in the unexpected. You know I'm extremely fond of the unexpected, and now that you've kept the game in your hands I depend on your giving us some grand example of it.'

'I don't understand you very well,' said Isabel, 'but I do so well enough to be able to say that if you look for grand examples of anything from me I shall disappoint you.'

'You'll do so only by disappointing yourself—and that will go hard with you!'

To this she made no direct reply; there was an amount of truth in it that would bear consideration. At last she said abruptly: ‘I don’t see what harm there is in my wishing not to tie myself. I don’t want to begin life by marrying. There are other things a woman can do.’

‘There’s nothing she can do so well. But you’re of course so manysided.’

‘If one’s two-sided it’s enough,’ said Isabel.

‘You’re the most charming of polygons!’ her companion broke out. At a glance from his companion, however, he became grave, and to prove it went on: ‘You want to see life—you’ll be hanged if you don’t, as the young men say.’

‘I don’t think I want to see it as the young men want to see it. But I do want to look about me.’

‘You want to drain the cup of experience.’

‘No, I don’t wish to touch the cup of experience. It’s a poisoned drink! I only want to see for myself.’

‘You want to see, but not to feel,’ Ralph remarked.

‘I don’t think that if one’s a sentient being one can make the distinction. I’m a good deal like Henrietta. The other day when I asked her if she wished to marry she said: “Not till I’ve seen Europe!” I too don’t wish to marry till I’ve seen Europe.’

‘You evidently expect a crowned head will be struck with you.’

‘No, that would be worse than marrying Lord Warburton. But it’s getting very dark,’ Isabel continued, ‘and I must go home.’ She rose from her place, but Ralph only sat still and looked at her. As he remained there she stopped, and they exchanged a gaze that was full on either side, but especially on Ralph’s, of utterances too vague for words.

‘You’ve answered my question,’ he said at last. ‘You’ve told me what I wanted. I’m greatly obliged to you.’

‘It seems to me I’ve told you very little.’

‘You’ve told me the great thing: that the world interests you and that you want to throw yourself into it.’

Her silvery eyes shone a moment in the dusk. ‘I never said that.’

‘I think you meant it. Don’t repudiate it. It’s so fine!’

‘I don’t know what you’re trying to fasten upon me, for I’m not in the least an adventurous spirit. Women are not like men.’

Ralph slowly rose from his seat and they walked together to the gate of the square. ‘No,’ he said; ‘women rarely boast of their courage. Men do so with a certain frequency.’

‘Men have it to boast of!’

‘Women have it too. You’ve a great deal.’

‘Enough to go home in a cab to Pratt’s Hotel, but not more.’

Ralph unlocked the gate, and after they had passed out he fastened it. ‘We’ll find your cab,’ he said; and as they turned toward a neighbouring street in which this quest might avail he asked her again if he mightn’t see her safely to the inn.

‘By no means,’ she answered; ‘you’re very tired; you must go home and go to bed.’

The cab was found, and he helped her into it, standing a moment at the door. ‘When people forget I’m a poor creature I’m often incommoded,’ he said. ‘But it’s worse when they remember it!’

XVI

SHE had had no hidden motive in wishing him not to take her home; it simply struck her that for some days past she had consumed an inordinate quantity of his time, and the independent spirit of the American girl whom extravagance of aid places in an attitude that she ends by finding 'affected' had made her decide that for these few hours she must suffice to herself. She had moreover a great fondness for intervals of solitude, which since her arrival in England had been but meagrely met. It was a luxury she could always command at home and she had wittingly missed it. That evening, however, an incident occurred which—had there been a critic to note it—would have taken all colour from the theory that the wish to be quite by herself had caused her to dispense with her cousin's attendance. Seated toward nine o'clock in the dim illumination of Pratt's Hotel and trying with the aid of two tall candles to lose herself in a volume she had brought from Gardencourt, she succeeded only to the extent of reading other words than those printed on the page—words that Ralph had spoken to her that afternoon. Suddenly the well-muffled knuckle of the waiter was applied to the door, which presently gave way to his exhibition, even as a glorious trophy, of the card of a visitor. When this memento had offered to her fixed sight the name of Mr Caspar Goodwood she let the man stand before her without signifying her wishes.

'Shall I show the gentleman up, ma'am?' he asked with a slightly encouraging inflexion.

Isabel hesitated still and while she hesitated glanced at the mirror. 'He may come in,' she said at last; and waited for him not so much smoothing her hair as girding her spirit.

Caspar Goodwood was accordingly the next moment shaking hands with her, but saying nothing till the servant had left the room. 'Why didn't you answer my letter?' he then asked in a quick, full, slightly peremptory tone—the tone of a man whose questions were habitually pointed and who was capable of much insistence.

She answered by a ready question, 'How did you know I was here?'

'Miss Stackpole let me know,' said Caspar Goodwood. 'She told me you would probably be at home alone this evening and would be willing to see me.'

'Where did she see you—to tell you that?'

'She didn't see me; she wrote to me.'

Isabel was silent; neither had sat down; they stood there with an air of defiance, or at least of contention. 'Henrietta never told me she was writing to you,' she said at last. 'This is not kind of her.'

'Is it so disagreeable to you to see me?' asked the young man.

'I didn't expect it. I don't like such surprises.'

'But you knew I was in town; it was natural we should meet.'

'Do you call this meeting? I hoped I shouldn't see you. In so big a place as London it seemed very possible.'

'It was apparently repugnant to you even to write to me,' her visitor went on.

Isabel made no reply; the sense of Henrietta Stackpole's treachery, as she momentarily qualified it, was strong within her. 'Henrietta's certainly not a model of all the delicacies!' she exclaimed with bitterness: 'It was a great liberty to take.'

'I suppose I'm not a model either—of those virtues or of any others. The fault's mine as much as hers.'

As Isabel looked at him it seemed to her that his jaw had never been more square. This might have displeased her, but she took a different turn. 'No, it's not your fault so much as hers. What you've done was inevitable, I suppose, for *you*.'

'It was indeed!' cried Caspar Goodwood with a voluntary laugh. 'And now that I've come, at any rate, mayn't I stay?'

'You may sit down, certainly.'

She went back to her chair again, while her visitor took the first place that offered, in the manner of a man accustomed to pay little thought to that sort of furtherance. 'I've been hoping every day for an answer to my letter. You might have written me a few lines.'

'It wasn't the trouble of writing that prevented me; I could as easily have written you four pages as one. But my silence was an intention,' Isabel said. 'I thought it the best thing.'

He sat with his eyes fixed on hers while she spoke; then he lowered them and attached them to a spot in the carpet as if he were making a strong effort to say nothing but what he ought. He was a strong man in the wrong, and he was acute enough to see that an uncompromising exhibition of his strength would only throw the falsity of his position into relief. Isabel was not incapable of taking any advantage of position over a person of this quality, and though little desirous to flaunt it in his face she could enjoy being able to say 'You know you oughtn't to have written to me yourself!' and to say it with an air of triumph.

Caspar Goodwood raised his eyes to her own again; they seemed to shine through the vizard of a helmet. He had a strong sense of justice and was ready any day in the year—over and above this—to argue the question of his rights. 'You said you hoped never to hear from me again; I know that. But I never accepted any such rule as my own. I warned you that you should hear very soon.'

'I didn't say I hoped *never* to hear from you,' said Isabel.

'Not for five years then; for ten years; twenty years. It's the same thing.'

'Do you find it so? It seems to me there's a great difference. I can imagine that at the end of ten years we might have a very pleasant correspondence. I shall have matured my epistolary style.'

She looked away while she spoke these words, knowing them of so much less earnest a cast than the countenance of her listener. Her eyes, however, at last came back to him, just as he said very irrelevantly: 'Are you enjoying your visit to your uncle?'

'Very much indeed.' She dropped, but then she broke out. 'What good do you expect to get by insisting?'

'The good of not losing you.'

'You've no right to talk of losing what's not yours. And even from your own point of view,' Isabel added, 'you ought to know when to let one alone.'

'I disgust you very much,' said Caspar Goodwood gloomily; not as if to provoke her to compassion for a man conscious of this blighting fact, but as if to set it well before himself, so that he might endeavour to act with his eyes on it.

'Yes, you don't at all delight me, you don't fit in, not in any way, just now, and the worst is that your putting it to the proof in this manner is quite unnecessary.' It wasn't certainly as if his nature had been soft, so that pin-pricks would draw blood from it; and from the first of her acquaintance with him, and of her having to defend herself against a certain air that he had of knowing better what was good for her than she knew herself, she had recognised the fact that perfect frankness was her best weapon. To attempt to spare his sensibility or to escape from him edgewise, as one might do from a man who had barred the way less sturdily—this, in dealing with Caspar Goodwood, who would grasp at everything of every sort that one might give him, was wasted agility. It was not that he had not susceptibilities, but his passive surface, as well as his active, was large and hard, and he might always be trusted to dress his wounds, so far as they required it, himself. She came back, even for her measure of possible pangs and aches in him, to her old sense that he was naturally plated and steeled, armed essentially for aggression.

'I can't reconcile myself to that,' he simply said. There was a dangerous liberality about it; for she felt how open it was to him to make the point that he had not always disgusted her.

'I can't reconcile myself to it either, and it's not the state of things that ought to exist between us. If you'd only try to banish me from your mind for a few months we should be on good terms again.'

'I see. If I should cease to think of you at all for a prescribed time, I should find I could keep it up indefinitely.'

'Indefinitely is more than I ask. It's more even than I should like.'

'You know that what you ask is impossible,' said the young man, taking his adjective for granted in a manner she found irritating.

'Aren't you capable of making a calculated effort?' she demanded. 'You're strong for everything else; why shouldn't you be strong for that?'

'An effort calculated for what?' And then as she hung fire, 'I'm capable of nothing with regard to you,' he went on, 'but just of being infernally in love with you. If one's strong one loves only the more strongly.'

'There's a good deal in that;' and indeed our young lady felt the force of it—felt it thrown off, into the vast of truth and poetry, as practically a bait to her imagination. But she promptly came round. 'Think of me or not, as you find most possible; only leave me alone.'

'Until when?'

‘Well, for a year or two.’

‘Which do you mean? Between one year and two there’s all the difference in the world.’

‘Call it two then,’ said Isabel with a studied effect of eagerness.

‘And what shall I gain by that?’ her friend asked with no sign of wincing.

‘You’ll have obliged me greatly.’

‘And what will be my reward?’

‘Do you need a reward for an act of generosity?’

‘Yes, when it involves a great sacrifice.’

‘There’s no generosity without some sacrifice. Men don’t understand such things. If you make the sacrifice you’ll have all my admiration.’

‘I don’t care a cent for your admiration—not one straw, with nothing to show for it. When will you marry me? That’s the only question.’

‘Never—if you go on making me feel only as I feel at present.’

‘What do I gain then by not trying to make you feel otherwise?’

‘You’ll gain quite as much as by worrying me to death!’ Caspar Goodwood bent his eyes again and gazed a while into the crown of his hat. A deep flush overspread his face; she could see her sharpness had at last penetrated. This immediately had a value—classic, romantic, redeeming, what did she know?—for her; ‘the strong man in pain’ was one of the categories of the human appeal, little charm as he might exert in the given case. ‘Why do you make me say such things to you?’ she cried in a trembling voice. ‘I only want to be gentle—to be thoroughly kind. It’s not delightful to me to feel people care for me and yet to have to try and reason them out of it. I think others also ought to be considerate; we have each to judge for ourselves. I know you’re considerate, as much as you can be; you’ve good reasons for what you do. But I really don’t want to marry, or to talk about it at all now. I shall probably never do it—no, never. I’ve a perfect right to feel that way, and it’s no kindness to a woman to press her so hard, to urge her against her will. If I give you pain I can only say I’m very sorry. It’s not my fault; I can’t marry you simply to please you. I won’t say that I shall always remain your friend, because when women say that, in these situations, it passes, I believe, for a sort of mockery. But try me some day.’

Caspar Goodwood, during this speech, had kept his eyes fixed upon the name of his hatter, and it was not until some time after she had ceased speaking that he raised them. When he did so the sight of a rosy, lovely eagerness in Isabel’s face threw some confusion into his attempt to analyse her words. ‘I’ll go home—I’ll go to-morrow—I’ll leave you alone,’ he brought out at last. ‘Only,’ he heavily said, ‘I hate to lose sight of you!’

‘Never fear. I shall do no harm.’

‘You’ll marry some one else, as sure as I sit here,’ Caspar Goodwood declared.

‘Do you think that a generous charge?’

‘Why not? Plenty of men will try to make you.’

‘I told you just now that I don’t wish to marry and that I almost certainly never shall.’

‘I know you did, and I like your “almost certainly”! I put no faith in what you say.’

‘Thank you very much. Do you accuse me of lying to shake you off? You say very delicate things.’

‘Why should I not say that? You’ve given me no pledge of anything at all.’

‘No, that’s all that would be wanting!’

‘You may perhaps even believe you’re safe—from wishing to be. But you’re not,’ the young man went on as if preparing himself for the worst.

‘Very well then. We’ll put it that I’m not safe. Have it as you please.’

‘I don’t know, however,’ said Caspar Goodwood, ‘that my keeping you in sight would prevent it.’

‘Don’t you indeed? I’m after all very much afraid of you. Do you think I’m so very easily pleased?’ she asked suddenly, changing her tone.

‘No—I don’t; I shall try to console myself with that. But there are a certain number of very dazzling men in the world, no doubt; and if there were only one it would be enough. The most dazzling of all will make straight for you. You’ll be sure to take no one who isn’t dazzling.’

‘If you mean by dazzling brilliantly clever,’ Isabel said—‘and I can’t imagine what else you mean—I don’t need the aid of a clever man to teach me how to live. I can find it out for myself.’

‘Find out how to live alone? I wish that, when you have, you’d teach *me*!’

She looked at him a moment; then with a quick smile, ‘Oh, *you* ought to marry!’ she said.

He might be pardoned if for an instant this exclamation seemed to him to sound the infernal note, and it is not on record that her motive for discharging such a shaft had been of the clearest. He oughtn’t to stride about lean and hungry, however—she certainly felt *that* for him. ‘God forgive you!’ he murmured between his teeth as he turned away.

Her accent had put her slightly in the wrong, and after a moment she felt the need to right herself. The easiest way to do it was to place him where she had been. ‘You do me great injustice—you say what you don’t know!’ she broke out. ‘I shouldn’t be an easy victim—I’ve proved it.’

‘Oh, to me, perfectly.’

‘I’ve proved it to others as well.’ And she paused a moment. ‘I refused a proposal of marriage last week; what they call—no doubt—a dazzling one.’

‘I’m very glad to hear it,’ said the young man gravely.

‘It was a proposal many girls would have accepted; it had everything to recommend it.’ Isabel had not proposed to herself to tell this story, but, now she had begun, the satisfaction of speaking it out and doing herself justice took possession of her. ‘I was offered a great position and a great fortune—by a person whom I like extremely.’

Caspar watched her with intense interest. ‘Is he an Englishman?’

‘He’s an English nobleman,’ said Isabel.

Her visitor received this announcement at first in silence, but at last said: ‘I’m glad he’s disappointed.’

‘Well then, as you have companions in misfortune, make the best of it.’

‘I don’t call him a companion,’ said Caspar grimly.

‘Why not—since I declined his offer absolutely?’

‘That doesn’t make him my companion. Besides, he’s an Englishman.’

‘And pray isn’t an Englishman a human being?’ Isabel asked.

‘Oh, those people? They’re not of *my* humanity, and I don’t care what becomes of them.’

‘You’re very angry,’ said the girl. ‘We’ve discussed this matter quite enough.’

‘Oh yes, I’m very angry. I plead guilty to that!’

She turned away from him, walked to the open window and stood a moment looking into the dusky void of the street, where a turbid gaslight alone represented social animation. For some time neither of these young persons spoke; Caspar lingered near the chimneypiece with eyes gloomily attached. She had virtually requested him to go—he knew that; but at the risk of making himself odious he kept his ground. She was too nursed a need to be easily renounced, and he had crossed the sea all to wring from her some scrap of a vow. Presently she left the window and stood again before him. ‘You do me very little justice—after my telling you what I told you just now. I’m sorry I told you—since it matters so little to you.’

‘Ah,’ cried the young man, ‘if you were thinking of me when you did it!’ And then he paused with the fear that she might contradict so happy a thought.

‘I was thinking of you a little,’ said Isabel.

‘A little? I don’t understand. If the knowledge of what I feel for you had any weight with you at all, calling it a “little” is a poor account of it.’

Isabel shook her head as if to carry off a blunder. ‘I’ve refused a most kind, noble gentleman. Make the most of that.’

‘I thank you then,’ said Caspar Goodwood gravely. ‘I thank you immensely.’

‘And now you had better go home.’

‘May I not see you again?’ he asked.

‘I think it’s better not. You’ll be sure to talk of this, and you see it leads to nothing.’

‘I promise you not to say a word that will annoy you.’

Isabel reflected and then answered: ‘I return in a day or two to my uncle’s, and I can’t propose to you to come there. It would be too inconsistent.’

Caspar Goodwood, on his side, considered. ‘You must do me justice too. I received an invitation to your uncle’s more than a week ago, and I declined it.’

She betrayed surprise. ‘From whom was your invitation?’

‘From Mr Ralph Touchett, whom I suppose to be your cousin. I declined it because I had not your authorisation to accept it. The suggestion that Mr Touchett should invite me appeared to have come from

Miss Stackpole.'

'It certainly never did from me. Henrietta really goes very far,' Isabel added.

'Don't be too hard on her—that touches *me*.'

'No; if you declined you did quite right, and I thank you for it.' And she gave a little shudder of dismay at the thought that Lord Warburton and Mr Goodwood might have met at Gardencourt: it would have been so awkward for Lord Warburton.

'When you leave your uncle where do you go?' her companion asked.

'I go abroad with my aunt—to Florence and other places.'

The serenity of this announcement struck a chill to the young man's heart; he seemed to see her whirled away into circles from which he was inexorably excluded. Nevertheless he went on quickly with his questions. 'And when shall you come back to America?'

'Perhaps not for a long time. I'm very happy here.'

'Do you mean to give up your country?'

'Don't be an infant!'

'Well, you'll be out of my sight indeed!' said Caspar Goodwood.

'I don't know,' she answered rather grandly. 'The world—with all these places so arranged and so touching each other—comes to strike one as rather small.'

'It's a sight too big for *me*!' Caspar exclaimed with a simplicity our young lady might have found touching if her face had not been set against concessions.

This attitude was part of a system, a theory, that she had lately embraced, and to be thorough she said after a moment: 'Don't think me unkind if I say it's just *that*—being out of your sight—that I like. If you were in the same place I should feel you were watching me, and I don't like that—I like my liberty too much. If there's a thing in the world I'm fond of,' she went on with a slight recurrence of grandeur, 'it's my personal independence.'

But whatever there might be of the too superior in this speech moved Caspar Goodwood's admiration; there was nothing he winced at in the large air of it. He had never supposed she hadn't wings and the need of beautiful free movements—he wasn't, with his own long arms and strides, afraid of any force in her. Isabel's words, if they had been meant to shock him, failed of the mark and only made him smile with the sense that here was common ground. 'Who would wish less to curtail your liberty than I? What can give me greater pleasure than to see you perfectly independent—doing whatever you like? It's to make you independent that I want to marry you.'

'That's a beautiful sophism,' said the girl with a smile more beautiful still.

'An ummarried woman—a girl of your age—isn't independent. There are all sorts of things she can't do. She's hampered at every step.'

'That's as she looks at the question,' Isabel answered with much spirit. 'I'm not in my first youth—I can do what I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries. Besides, I try to judge things for myself; to judge wrong, I think, is more honourable than not to judge at all. I don't wish to be a mere sheep in the flock; I wish to choose my fate and know something of human affairs beyond what other people think it compatible with propriety to tell me.' She paused a moment, but not long enough for her companion to reply. He was apparently on the point of doing so when she went on: 'Let me say this to you, Mr Goodwood. You're so kind as to speak of being afraid of my marrying. If you should hear a rumour that I'm on the point of doing so—girls are liable to have such things said about them—remember what I have told you about my love of liberty and venture to doubt it.'

There was something passionately positive in the tone in which she gave him this advice, and he saw a shining candour in her eyes that helped him to believe her. On the whole he felt reassured, and you might have perceived it by the manner in which he said, quite eagerly: 'You want simply to travel for two years? I'm quite willing to wait two years, and you may do what you like in the interval. If that's all you want, pray say so. I don't want you to be conventional; do I strike you as conventional myself? Do you want to improve your mind? Your mind's quite good enough for me; but if it interests you to wander about a while and see different countries I shall be delighted to help you in any way in my power.'

'You're very generous; that's nothing new to me. The best way to help me will be to put as many hundred miles of sea between us as possible.'

'One would think you were going to commit some atrocity!' said Caspar Goodwood.

‘Perhaps I am. I wish to be free even to do that if the fancy takes me.’

‘Well then,’ he said slowly, ‘I’ll go home.’ And he put out his hand, trying to look contented and confident.

Isabel’s confidence in him, however, was greater than any he could feel in her. Not that he thought her capable of committing an atrocity; but, turn it over as he would, there was something ominous in the way she reserved her option. As she took his hand she felt a great respect for him; she knew how much he cared for her and she thought him magnanimous. They stood so for a moment, looking at each other, united by a hand-clasp which was not merely passive on her side. ‘That’s right,’ she said very kindly, almost tenderly. ‘You’ll lose nothing by being a reasonable man.’

‘But I’ll come back, wherever you are, two years hence,’ he returned with characteristic grimness.

We have seen that our young lady was inconsequent, and at this she suddenly changed her note. ‘Ah, remember, I promise nothing—absolutely nothing!’ Then more softly, as if to help him to leave her: ‘And remember too that I shall not be an easy victim!’

‘You’ll get very sick of your independence.’

‘Perhaps I shall; it’s even very probable. When that day comes I shall be very glad to see you.’

She had laid her hand on the knob of the door that led into her room, and she waited a moment to see whether her visitor would not take his departure. But he appeared unable to move; there was still an immense unwillingness in his attitude and a sore remonstrance in his eyes. ‘I must leave you now,’ said Isabel; and she opened the door and passed into the other room.

This apartment was dark, but the darkness was tempered by a vague radiance sent up through the window from the court of the hotel, and Isabel could make out the masses of the furniture, the dim shining of the mirror and the looming of the big four-posted bed. She stood still a moment, listening, and at last she heard Caspar Goodwood walk out of the sitting-room and close the door behind him. She stood still a little longer, and then, by an irresistible impulse, dropped on her knees before her bed and hid her face in her arms.

XVII

SHE was not praying; she was trembling—trembling all over. Vibration was easy to her, was in fact too constant with her, and she found herself now humming like a smitten harp. She only asked, however, to put on the cover, to case herself again in brown holland,* but she wished to resist her excitement, and the attitude of devotion, which she kept for some time, seemed to help her to be still. She intensely rejoiced that Caspar Goodwood was gone; there was something in having thus got rid of him that was like the payment, for a stamped receipt, of some debt too long on her mind. As she felt the glad relief she bowed her head a little lower; the sense was there, throbbing in her heart; it was part of her emotion, but it was a thing to be ashamed of—it was profane and out of place. It was not for some ten minutes that she rose from her knees, and even when she came back to the sitting-room her tremor had not quite subsided. It had had, verily, two causes: part of it was to be accounted for by her long discussion with Mr Goodwood, but it might be feared that the rest was simply the enjoyment she found in the exercise of her power. She sat down in the same chair again and took up her book, but without going through the form of opening the volume. She leaned back, with that low, soft, aspiring murmur with which she often uttered her response to accidents of which the brighter side was not superficially obvious, and yielded to the satisfaction of having refused two ardent suitors in a fortnight. That love of liberty of which she had given Caspar Goodwood so bold a sketch was as yet almost exclusively theoretic; she had not been able to indulge it on a large scale. But it appeared to her she had done something; she had tasted of the delight, if not of battle, at least of victory; she had done what was truest to her plan. In the glow of this consciousness the image of Mr Goodwood taking his sad walk homeward through the dingy town presented itself with a certain reproachful force; so that, as at the same moment the door of the room was opened, she rose with an apprehension that he had come back. But it was only Henrietta Stackpole returning from her dinner.

Miss Stackpole immediately saw that our young lady had been ‘through’ something, and indeed the discovery demanded no great penetration. She went straight up to her friend, who received her without a greeting. Isabel’s elation in having sent Caspar Goodwood back to America presupposed her being in a manner glad he had come to see her; but at the same time she perfectly remembered Henrietta had had no right to set a trap for her. ‘Has he been here, dear?’ the latter yearningly asked.

Isabel turned away and for some moments answered nothing. ‘You acted very wrongly,’ she declared at last.

‘I acted for the best. I only hope you acted as well.’

‘You’re not the judge. I can’t trust you,’ said Isabel.

This declaration was unflattering, but Henrietta was much too unselfish to heed the charge it conveyed; she cared only for what it intimated with regard to her friend. ‘Isabel Archer,’ she observed with equal abruptness and solemnity, ‘if you marry one of these people I’ll never speak to you again!’

‘Before making so terrible a threat you had better wait till I’m asked,’ Isabel replied. Never having said a word to Miss Stackpole about Lord Warburton’s overtures, she had now no impulse whatever to justify herself to Henrietta by telling her that she had refused that nobleman.

‘Oh, you’ll be asked quick enough, once you get off on the Continent. Annie Climber was asked three times in Italy—poor plain little Annie.’

‘Well, if Annie Climber wasn’t captured why should I be?’

‘I don’t believe Annie was pressed; but you’ll be.’

‘That’s a flattering conviction,’ said Isabel without alarm.

‘I don’t flatter you, Isabel, I tell you the truth!’ cried her friend. ‘I hope you don’t mean to tell me that you didn’t give Mr Goodwood some hope.’

‘I don’t see why I should tell you anything; as I said to you just now, I can’t trust you. But since you’re so much interested in Mr Goodwood I won’t conceal from you that he returns immediately to America.’

‘You don’t mean to say you’ve sent him off?’ Henrietta almost shrieked.

‘I asked him to leave me alone; and I ask you the same, Henrietta.’ Miss Stackpole glittered for an instant with dismay and then passed to the mirror over the chimney-piece and took off her bonnet. ‘I hope you’ve enjoyed your dinner,’ Isabel went on.

But her companion was not to be diverted by frivolous propositions. ‘Do you know where you’re going, Isabel Archer?’

‘Just now I’m going to bed,’ said Isabel with persistent frivolity.

‘Do you know where you’re drifting?’ Henrietta pursued, holding out her bonnet delicately.

‘No, I haven’t the least idea, and I find it very pleasant not to know. A swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can’t see—that’s my idea of happiness.’

‘Mr Goodwood certainly didn’t teach you to say such things as that—like the heroine of an immoral novel,’ said Miss Stackpole. ‘You’re drifting to some great mistake.’

Isabel was irritated by her friend’s interference, yet she still tried to think what truth this declaration could represent. She could think of nothing that diverted her from saying: ‘You must be very fond of me, Henrietta, to be willing to be so aggressive.’

‘I love you intensely, Isabel,’ said Miss Stackpole with feeling.

‘Well, if you love me intensely let me as intensely alone. I asked that of Mr Goodwood, and I must also ask it of you.’

‘Take care you’re not let alone too much.’

‘That’s what Mr Goodwood said to me. I told him I must take the risks.’

‘You’re a creature of risks—you make me shudder!’ cried Henrietta. ‘When does Mr Goodwood return to America?’

‘I don’t know—he didn’t tell me.’

‘Perhaps you didn’t enquire,’ said Henrietta with the note of righteous irony.

‘I gave him too little satisfaction to have the right to ask questions of him.’

This assertion seemed to Miss Stackpole for a moment to bid defiance to comment; but at last she exclaimed: ‘Well, Isabel, if I didn’t know you I might think you were heartless!’

‘Take care,’ said Isabel; ‘you’re spoiling me.’

‘I’m afraid I’ve done that already. I hope, at least,’ Miss Stackpole added, ‘that he may cross with Annie Climber!’

Isabel learned from her the next morning that she had determined not to return to Gardencourt (where old Mr Touchett had promised her a renewed welcome), but to await in London the arrival of the invitation that Mr Bantling had promised her from his sister Lady Pensil. Miss Stackpole related very freely her conversation with Ralph Touchett’s sociable friend and declared to Isabel that she really believed she had now got hold of something that would lead to something. On the receipt of Lady Pensil’s letter—Mr Bantling had virtually guaranteed the arrival of this document—she would immediately depart for Bedfordshire, and if Isabel cared to look out for her impressions in the *Interviewer* she would certainly find them. Henrietta was evidently going to see something of the inner life this time.

‘Do you know where you’re drifting, Henrietta Stackpole?’ Isabel asked, imitating the tone in which her friend had spoken the night before.

‘I’m drifting to a big position—that of the Queen of American Journalism. If my next letter isn’t copied all over the West I’ll swallow my pen-wiper!’

She had arranged with her friend Miss Annie Climber, the young lady of the continental offers, that they should go together to make those purchases which were to constitute Miss Climber’s farewell to a hemisphere in which she at least had been appreciated; and she presently repaired to Jermyn Street to pick up her companion. Shortly after her departure Ralph Touchett was announced, and as soon as he came in Isabel saw he had something on his mind. He very soon took his cousin into his confidence. He had received from his mother a telegram to the effect that his father had had a sharp attack of his old malady, that she was much alarmed and that she begged he would instantly return to Gardencourt. On this occasion at least Mrs Touchett’s devotion to the electric wire was not open to criticism.

‘I’ve judged it best to see the great doctor, Sir Matthew Hope, first,’ Ralph said; ‘by great good luck he’s in town. He’s to see me at half-past twelve, and I shall make sure of his coming down to Gardencourt —which he will do the more readily as he has already seen my father several times, both there and in London. There’s an express at two-forty–five, which I shall take; and you’ll come back with me or remain here a few days longer, exactly as you prefer.’

‘I shall certainly go with you,’ Isabel returned. ‘I don’t suppose I can be of any use to my uncle, but if he’s ill I shall like to be near him.’

‘I think you’re fond of him,’ said Ralph with a certain shy pleasure in his face. ‘You appreciate him,

which all the world hasn't done. The quality's too fine.'

'I quite adore him,' Isabel after a moment said.

'That's very well. After his son he's your greatest admirer.'

She welcomed this assurance, but she gave secretly a small sigh of relief at the thought that Mr Touchett was one of those admirers who couldn't propose to marry her. This, however, was not what she spoke; she went on to inform Ralph that there were other reasons for her not remaining in London. She was tired of it and wished to leave it; and then Henrietta was going away—going to stay in Bedfordshire.

'In Bedfordshire?'

'With Lady Pensil, the sister of Mr Bantling, who has answered for an invitation.'

Ralph was feeling anxious, but at this he broke into a laugh. Suddenly, none the less, his gravity returned. 'Bantling's a man of courage. But if the invitation should get lost on the way?'

'I thought the British post-office was impeccable.'

'The good Homer sometimes nods,'* said Ralph. 'However,' he went on more brightly, 'the good Bantling never does, and, whatever happens, he'll take care of Henrietta.'

Ralph went to keep his appointment with Sir Matthew Hope, and Isabel made her arrangements for quitting Pratt's Hotel. Her uncle's danger touched her nearly, and while she stood before her open trunk, looking about her vaguely for what she should put into it, the tears suddenly rose to her eyes. It was perhaps for this reason that when Ralph came back at two o'clock to take her to the station she was not yet ready. He found Miss Stackpole, however, in the sittingroom, where she had just risen from her luncheon, and this lady immediately expressed her regret at his father's illness.

'He's a grand old man,' she said; 'he's faithful to the last. If it's really to be the last—pardon my alluding to it, but you must often have thought of the possibility—I'm sorry that I shall not be at Gardencourt.'

'You'll amuse yourself much more in Bedfordshire.'

'I shall be sorry to amuse myself at such a time,' said Henrietta with much propriety. But she immediately added: 'I should like so to commemorate the closing scene.'

'My father may live a long time,' said Ralph simply. Then, adverting to topics more cheerful, he interrogated Miss Stackpole as to her own future.

Now that Ralph was in trouble she addressed him in a tone of larger allowance and told him that she was much indebted to him for having made her acquainted with Mr Bantling. 'He has told me just the things I want to know,' she said; 'all the society-items and all about the royal family. I can't make out that what he tells me about the royal family is much to their credit; but he says that's only my peculiar way of looking at it. Well, all I want is that he should give me the facts; I can put them together quick enough, once I've got them.' And she added that Mr Bantling had been so good as to promise to come and take her out that afternoon.

'To take you where?' Ralph ventured to enquire.

'To Buckingham Palace. He's going to show me over it, so that I may get some idea how they live.'

'Ah,' said Ralph, 'we leave you in good hands. The first thing we shall hear is that you're invited to Windsor Castle.'

'If they ask me, I shall certainly go. Once I get started I'm not afraid. But for all that,' Henrietta added in a moment, 'I'm not satisfied; I'm not at peace about Isabel.'

'What is her last misdemeanour?'

'Well, I've told you before, and I suppose there's no harm in my going on. I always finish a subject that I take up. Mr Goodwood was here last night.'

Ralph opened his eyes; he even blushed a little—his blush being the sign of an emotion somewhat acute. He remembered that Isabel, in separating from him in Winchester Square, had repudiated his suggestion that her motive in doing so was the expectation of a visitor at Pratt's Hotel, and it was a new pang to him to have to suspect her of duplicity. On the other hand, he quickly said to himself, what concern was it of his that she should have made an appointment with a lover? Had it not been thought graceful in every age that young ladies should make a mystery of such appointments? Ralph gave Miss Stackpole a diplomatic answer. 'I should have thought that, with the views you expressed to me the other day, this would satisfy you perfectly.'

'That he should come to see her? That was very well, as far as it went. It was a little plot of mine; I let him know that we were in London, and when it had been arranged that I should spend the evening out I sent him a word—the word we just utter to the "wise." I hoped he would find her alone; I won't pretend I

didn't hope that you'd be out of the way. He came to see her, but he might as well have stayed away.'

'Isabel was cruel?'—and Ralph's face lighted with the relief of his cousin's not having shown duplicity.

'I don't exactly know what passed between them. But she gave him no satisfaction—she sent him back to America.'

'Poor Mr Goodwood!' Ralph sighed.

'Her only idea seems to be to get rid of him,' Henrietta went on.

'Poor Mr Goodwood!' Ralph repeated. The exclamation, it must be confessed, was automatic; it failed exactly to express his thoughts, which were taking another line.

'You don't say that as if you felt it. I don't believe you care.'

'Ah,' said Ralph, 'you must remember that I don't know this interesting young man—that I've never seen him.'

'Well, I shall see him, and I shall tell him not to give up. If I didn't believe Isabel would come round,' Miss Stackpole added—'well, I'd give up myself. I mean I'd give *her* up!'

XVIII

IT had occurred to Ralph that, in the conditions, Isabel's parting with her friend might be of a slightly embarrassed nature, and he went down to the door of the hotel in advance of his cousin, who, after a slight delay, followed with the traces of an unaccepted remonstrance, as he thought, in her eyes. The two made the journey to Gardencourt in almost unbroken silence, and the servant who met them at the station had no better news to give them of Mr Touchett—a fact which caused Ralph to congratulate himself afresh on Sir Matthew Hope's having promised to come down in the five o'clock train and spend the night. Mrs Touchett, he learned, on reaching home, had been constantly with the old man and was with him at that moment; and this fact made Ralph say to himself that, after all, what his mother wanted was just easy occasion. The finer natures were those that shone at the larger times. Isabel went to her own room, noting throughout the house that perceptible hush which precedes a crisis. At the end of an hour, however, she came downstairs in search of her aunt, whom she wished to ask about Mr Touchett. She went into the library, but Mrs Touchett was not there, and as the weather, which had been damp and chill, was now altogether spoiled, it was not probable she had gone for her usual walk in the grounds. Isabel was on the point of ringing to send a question to her room, when this purpose quickly yielded to an unexpected sound—the sound of low music proceeding apparently from the saloon. She knew her aunt never touched the piano, and the musician was therefore probably Ralph, who played for his own amusement. That he should have resorted to this recreation at the present time indicated apparently that his anxiety about his father had been relieved; so that the girl took her way, almost with restored cheer, toward the source of the harmony. The drawing-room at Gardencourt was an apartment of great distances, and, as the piano was placed at the end of it furthest removed from the door at which she entered, her arrival was not noticed by the person seated before the instrument. This person was neither Ralph nor his mother; it was a lady whom Isabel immediately saw to be a stranger to herself, though her back was presented to the door. This back—an ample and well-dressed one—Isabel viewed for some moments with surprise. The lady was of course a visitor who had arrived during her absence and who had not been mentioned by either of the servants—one of them her aunt's maid—of whom she had had speech since her return. Isabel had already learned, however, with what treasures of reserve the function of receiving orders may be accompanied, and she was particularly conscious of having been treated with dryness by her aunt's maid, through whose hands she had slipped perhaps a little too mistrustfully and with an effect of plumage but the more lustrous. The advent of a guest was in itself far from disconcerting; she had not yet divested herself of a young faith that each new acquaintance would exert some momentous influence on her life. By the time she had made these reflexions she became aware that the lady at the piano played remarkably well. She was playing something of Schubert's—Isabel knew not what, but recognised Schubert—and she touched the piano with a discretion of her own. It showed skill, it showed feeling;* Isabel sat down noiselessly on the nearest chair and waited till the end of the piece. When it was finished she felt a strong desire to thank the player, and rose from her seat to do so, while at the same time the stranger turned quickly round, as if but just aware of her presence.

'That's very beautiful, and your playing makes it more beautiful still,' said Isabel with all the young radiance with which she usually uttered a truthful rapture.

'You don't think I disturbed Mr Touchett then?' the musician answered as sweetly as this compliment deserved. 'The house is so large and his room so far away that I thought I might venture, especially as I played just—just *du bout des doigts*.'*

'She's a Frenchwoman,' Isabel said to herself; 'she says that as if she were French.' And this supposition made the visitor more interesting to our speculative heroine. 'I hope my uncle's doing well,' Isabel added. 'I should think that to hear such lovely music as that would really make him feel better.'

The lady smiled and discriminated. 'I'm afraid there are moments in life when even Schubert has nothing to say to us. We must admit, however, that they are our worst.'

'I'm not in that state now then,' said Isabel. 'On the contrary I should be so glad if you would play something more.'

'If it will give you pleasure—delighted.' And this obliging person took her place again and struck a few chords, while Isabel sat down nearer the instrument. Suddenly the new-comer stopped with her hands on the keys, half-turning and looking over her shoulder. She was forty years old and not pretty, though her expression charmed. 'Pardon me,' she said; 'but are you the niece—the young American?'

‘I’m my aunt’s niece,’ Isabel replied with simplicity.

The lady at the piano sat still a moment longer, casting her air of interest over her shoulder. ‘That’s very well; we’re compatriots.’ And then she began to play.

‘Ah then she’s not French,’ Isabel murmured; and as the opposite supposition had made her romantic it might have seemed that this revelation would have marked a drop. But such was not the fact; rarer even than to be French seemed it to be American on such interesting terms.

The lady played in the same manner as before, softly and solemnly, and while she played the shadows deepened in the room. The autumn twilight gathered in, and from her place Isabel could see the rain, which had now begun in earnest, washing the cold-looking lawn and the wind shaking the great trees. At last, when the music had ceased, her companion got up and, coming nearer with a smile, before Isabel had time to thank her again, said: ‘I’m very glad you’ve come back; I’ve heard a great deal about you.’

Isabel thought her a very attractive person, but nevertheless spoke with a certain abruptness in reply to this speech. ‘From whom have you heard about me?’

The stranger hesitated a single moment and then, ‘From your uncle,’ she answered. ‘I’ve been here three days, and the first day he let me come and pay him a visit in his room. Then he talked constantly of you.’

‘As you didn’t know me that must rather have bored you.’

‘It made me want to know you. All the more that since then—your aunt being so much with Mr Touchett—I’ve been quite alone and have got rather tired of my own society. I’ve not chosen a good moment for my visit.’

A servant had come in with lamps and was presently followed by another bearing the tea-tray. On the appearance of this repast Mrs Touchett had apparently been notified, for she now arrived and addressed herself to the tea-pot. Her greeting to her niece did not differ materially from her manner of raising the lid of this receptacle in order to glance at the contents: in neither act was it becoming to make a show of avidity. Questioned about her husband she was unable to say he was better; but the local doctor was with him, and much light was expected from this gentleman’s consultation with Sir Matthew Hope.

‘I suppose you two ladies have made acquaintance,’ she pursued. ‘If you haven’t I recommend you to do so; for so long as we continue—Ralph and I—to cluster about Mr Touchett’s bed you’re not likely to have much society but each other.’

‘I know nothing about you but that you’re a great musician,’ Isabel said to the visitor.

‘There’s a good deal more than that to know,’ Mrs Touchett affirmed in her little dry tone.

‘A very little of it, I am sure, will content Miss Archer!’ the lady exclaimed with a light laugh. ‘I’m an old friend of your aunt’s. I’ve lived much in Florence. I’m Madame Merle.’* She made this last announcement as if she were referring to a person of tolerably distinct identity. For Isabel, however, it represented little; she could only continue to feel that Madame Merle had as charming a manner as any she had ever encountered.

‘She’s not a foreigner in spite of her name,’ said Mrs Touchett. ‘She was born—I always forget where you were born.’

‘It’s hardly worth while then I should tell you.’

‘On the contrary,’ said Mrs Touchett, who rarely missed a logical point; ‘if I remembered your telling me would be quite superfluous.’

Madame Merle glanced at Isabel with a sort of world-wide smile, a thing that over-reached frontiers. ‘I was born under the shadow of the national banner.’

‘She’s too fond of mystery,’ said Mrs Touchett; ‘that’s her great fault.’

‘Ah,’ exclaimed Madame Merle, ‘I’ve great faults, but I don’t think that’s one of them; it certainly isn’t the greatest. I came into the world in the Brooklyn navy-yard. My father was a high officer in the United States Navy, and had a post—a post of responsibility—in that establishment at the time. I suppose I ought to love the sea, but I hate it. That’s why I don’t return to America. I love the land; the great thing is to love something.’

Isabel, as a dispassionate witness, had not been struck with the force of Mrs Touchett’s characterisation of her visitor, who had an expressive, communicative, responsive face, by no means of the sort which, to Isabel’s mind, suggested a secretive disposition. It was a face that told of an amplitude of nature and of quick and free motions and, though it had no regular beauty, was in the highest degree engaging and attaching. Madame Merle was a tall, fair, smooth woman; everything in her person was round and replete, though without those accumulations which suggest heaviness. Her features were thick

but in perfect proportion and harmony, and her complexion had a healthy clearness. Her grey eyes were small but full of light and incapable of stupidity—incapable, according to some people, even of tears; she had a liberal, full-rimmed mouth which when she smiled drew itself upward to the left side in a manner that most people thought very odd, some very affected and a few very graceful. Isabel inclined to range herself in the last category. Madame Merle had thick, fair hair, arranged somehow 'classically' and as if she were a Bust, Isabel judged—a Juno or a Niobe;* and large white hands, of a perfect shape, a shape so perfect that their possessor, preferring to leave them unadorned, wore no jewelled rings. Isabel had taken her at first, as we have seen, for a Frenchwoman; but extended observation might have ranked her as a German—a German of high degree, perhaps an Austrian, a baroness, a countess, a princess. It would never have been supposed she had come into the world in Brooklyn—though one could doubtless not have carried through any argument that the air of distinction marking her in so eminent a degree was inconsistent with such a birth. It was true that the national banner had floated immediately over her cradle, and the breezy freedom of the stars and stripes might have shed an influence upon the attitude she there took towards life. And yet she had evidently nothing of the fluttered, flapping quality of a morsel of bunting in the wind; her manner expressed the repose and confidence which come from a large experience. Experience, however, had not quenched her youth; it had simply made her sympathetic and supple. She was in a word a woman of strong impulses kept in admirable order. This commended itself to Isabel as an ideal combination.

The girl made these reflections while the three ladies sat at their tea, but that ceremony was interrupted before long by the arrival of the great doctor from London, who had been immediately ushered into the drawing-room. Mrs Touchett took him off to the library for a private talk; and then Madame Merle and Isabel parted, to meet again at dinner. The idea of seeing more of this interesting woman did much to mitigate Isabel's sense of the sadness now settling on Gardencourt.

When she came into the drawing-room before dinner she found the place empty; but in the course of a moment Ralph arrived. His anxiety about his father had been lightened; Sir Matthew Hope's view of his condition was less depressed than his own had been. The doctor recommended that the nurse alone should remain with the old man for the next three or four hours; so that Ralph, his mother and the great physician himself were free to dine at table. Mrs Touchett and Sir Matthew appeared; Madame Merle was the last.

Before she came Isabel spoke of her to Ralph, who was standing before the fireplace. 'Pray who is this Madame Merle?'

'The cleverest woman I know, not excepting yourself,' said Ralph.

'I thought she seemed very pleasant.'

'I was sure you'd think her very pleasant.'

'Is that why you invited her?'

'I didn't invite her, and when we came back from London I didn't know she was here. No one invited her. She's a friend of my mother's, and just after you and I went to town my mother got a note from her. She had arrived in England (she usually lives abroad, though she has first and last spent a good deal of time here), and asked leave to come down for a few days. She's a woman who can make such proposals with perfect confidence; she's so welcome wherever she goes. And with my mother there could be no question of hesitating; she's the one person in the world whom my mother very much admires. If she were not herself (which she after all much prefers), she would like to be Madame Merle. It would indeed be a great change.'

'Well, she's very charming,' said Isabel. 'And she plays beautifully.'

'She does everything beautifully. She's complete.'

Isabel looked at her cousin a moment. 'You don't like her.'

'On the contrary, I was once in love with her.'

'And she didn't care for you, and that's why you don't like her.'

'How can we have discussed such things? Monsieur Merle was then living.'

'Is he dead now?'

'So she says.'

'Don't you believe her?'

'Yes, because the statement agrees with the probabilities. The husband of Madame Merle would be likely to pass away.'

Isabel gazed at her cousin again. 'I don't know what you mean. You mean something—that you don't

mean. What was Monsieur Merle?'

'The husband of Madame.'

'You're very odious. Has she any children?'

'Not the least little child—fortunately.'

'Fortunately?'

'I mean fortunately for the child. She'd be sure to spoil it.'

Isabel was apparently on the point of assuring her cousin for the third time that he was odious; but the discussion was interrupted by the arrival of the lady who was the topic of it. She came rustling in quickly, apologising for being late, fastening a bracelet, dressed in dark blue satin, which exposed a white bosom that was ineffectually covered by a curious silver necklace. Ralph offered her his arm with the exaggerated alertness of a man who was no longer a lover.

Even if this had still been his condition, however, Ralph had other things to think about. The great doctor spent the night at Gardencourt and, returning to London on the morrow, after another consultation with Mr Touchett's own medical adviser, concurred in Ralph's desire that he should see the patient again on the day following. On the day following Sir Matthew Hope reappeared at Gardencourt, and now took a less encouraging view of the old man, who had grown worse in the twenty-four hours. His feebleness was extreme, and to his son, who constantly sat by his bedside, it often seemed that his end must be at hand. The local doctor, a very sagacious man, in whom Ralph had secretly more confidence than in his distinguished colleague, was constantly in attendance, and Sir Matthew Hope came back several times. Mr Touchett was much of the time unconscious; he slept a great deal; he rarely spoke. Isabel had a great desire to be useful to him and was allowed to watch with him at hours when his other attendants (of whom Mrs Touchett was not the least regular) went to take rest. He never seemed to know her, and she always said to herself 'Suppose he should die while I'm sitting here'; an idea which excited her and kept her awake. Once he opened his eyes for a while and fixed them upon her intelligently, but when she went to him, hoping he would recognise her, he closed them and relapsed into stupor. The day after this, however, he revived for a longer time; but on this occasion Ralph only was with him. The old man began to talk, much to his son's satisfaction, who assured him that they should presently have him sitting up.

'No, my boy,' said Mr Touchett, 'not unless you bury me in a sitting posture, as some of the ancients—was it the ancients?—used to do.'

'Ah, daddy, don't talk about that,' Ralph murmured. 'You mustn't deny that you're getting better.'

'There will be no need of my denying it if you don't say it,' the old man answered. 'Why should we prevaricate just at the last? We never prevaricated before. I've got to die some time, and it's better to die when one's sick than when one's well. I'm very sick—as sick as I shall ever be. I hope you don't want to prove that I shall ever be worse than this? That would be too bad. You don't? Well then.'

Having made this excellent point he became quiet; but the next time that Ralph was with him he again addressed himself to conversation. The nurse had gone to her supper and Ralph was alone in charge, having just relieved Mrs Touchett, who had been on guard since dinner. The room was lighted only by the flickering fire, which of late had become necessary, and Ralph's tall shadow was projected over wall and ceiling with an outline constantly varying but always grotesque.

'Who's that with me—is it my son?' the old man asked.

'Yes, it's your son, daddy.'

'And is there no one else?'

'No one else.'

Mr Touchett said nothing for a while; and then, 'I want to talk a little,' he went on.

'Won't it tire you?' Ralph demurred.

'It won't matter if it does. I shall have a long rest. I want to talk about *you*.'

Ralph had drawn nearer to the bed; he sat leaning forward with his hand on his father's. 'You had better select a brighter topic.'

'You were always bright; I used to be proud of your brightness. I should like so much to think you'd do something.'

'If you leave us,' said Ralph, 'I shall do nothing but miss you.'

'That's just what I don't want; it's what I want to talk about. You must get a new interest.'

'I don't want a new interest, daddy. I have more old ones than I know what to do with.'

The old man lay there looking at his son; his face was the face of the dying, but his eyes were the eyes of Daniel Touchett. He seemed to be reckoning over Ralph's interests. 'Of course you have your mother,' he said at last. 'You'll take care of her.'

'My mother will always take care of herself,' Ralph returned.

'Well,' said his father, 'perhaps as she grows older she'll need a little help.'

'I shall not see that. She'll outlive me.'

'Very likely she will; but that's no reason—!' Mr Touchett let his phrase die away in a helpless but not quite querulous sigh and remained silent again.

'Don't trouble yourself about us,' said his son. 'My mother and I get on very well together, you know.'

'You get on by always being apart; that's not natural.'

'If you leave us we shall probably see more of each other.'

'Well,' the old man observed with wandering irrelevance, 'it can't be said that my death will make much difference in your mother's life.'

'It will probably make more than you think.'

'Well, she'll have more money,' said Mr Touchett. 'I've left her a good wife's portion, just as if she had been a good wife.'

'She has been one, daddy, according to her own theory. She has never troubled you.'

'Ah, some troubles are pleasant,' Mr Touchett murmured. 'Those you've given me for instance. But your mother has been less—less—what shall I call it? less out of the way since I've been ill. I presume she knows I've noticed it.'

'I shall certainly tell her so; I'm so glad you mention it.'

'It won't make any difference to her; she doesn't do it to please me. She does it to please—to please—' And he lay a while trying to think why she did it. 'She does it because it suits her. But that's not what I want to talk about,' he added. 'It's about you. You'll be very well off.'

'Yes,' said Ralph, 'I know that. But I hope you've not forgotten the talk we had a year ago—when I told you exactly what money I should need and begged you to make some good use of the rest.'

'Yes, yes, I remember. I made a new will—in a few days. I suppose it was the first time such a thing had happened—a young man trying to get a will made against him.'

'It is not against me,' said Ralph. 'It would be against me to have a large property to take care of. It's impossible for a man in my state of health to spend much money, and enough is as good as a feast.'

'Well, you'll have enough—and something over. There will be more than enough for one—there will be enough for two.'

'That's too much,' said Ralph.

'Ah, don't say that. The best thing you can do, when I'm gone, will be to marry.'

Ralph had foreseen what his father was coming to, and this suggestion was by no means fresh. It had long been Mr Touchett's most ingenious way of taking the cheerful view of his son's possible duration. Ralph had usually treated it facetiously; but present circumstances proscribed the facetious. He simply fell back in his chair and returned his father's appealing gaze.

'If I, with a wife who hasn't been very fond of me, have had a very happy life,' said the old man, carrying his ingenuity further still, 'what a life mightn't you have if you should marry a person different from Mrs Touchett. There are more different from her than there are like her.' Ralph still said nothing; and after a pause his father resumed softly: 'What do you think of your cousin?'

At this Ralph started, meeting the question with a strained smile. 'Do I understand you to propose that I should marry Isabel?'

'Well, that's what it comes to in the end. Don't you like Isabel?'

'Yes, very much.' And Ralph got up from his chair and wandered over to the fire. He stood before it an instant and then he stooped and stirred it mechanically. 'I like Isabel very much,' he repeated.

'Well,' said his father, 'I know she likes you. She has told me how much she likes you.'

'Did she remark that she would like to marry me?'

'No, but she can't have anything against you. And she's the most charming young lady I've ever seen. And she would be good to you. I have thought a great deal about it.'

'So have I,' said Ralph, coming back to the bedside again. 'I don't mind telling you that.'

'You are in love with her then? I should think you would be. It's as if she came over on purpose.'

‘No, I’m not in love with her; but I should be if—if certain things were different.’

‘Ah, things are always different from what they might be,’ said the old man. ‘If you wait for them to change you’ll never do anything. I don’t know whether you know,’ he went on; ‘but I suppose there’s no harm in my alluding to it at such an hour as this: there was some one wanted to marry Isabel the other day, and she wouldn’t have him.’

‘I know she refused Warburton: he told me himself.’

‘Well, that proves there’s a chance for somebody else.’

‘Somebody else took his chance the other day in London—and got nothing by it.’

‘Was it you?’ Mr Touchett eagerly asked.

‘No, it was an older friend; a poor gentleman who came over from America to see about it.’

‘Well, I’m sorry for him, whoever he was. But it only proves what I say—that the way’s open to you.’

‘If it is, dear father, it’s all the greater pity that I’m unable to tread it. I haven’t many convictions; but I have three or four that I hold strongly. One is that people, on the whole, had better not marry their cousins.* Another is that people in an advanced stage of pulmonary disorder had better not marry at all.’

The old man raised his weak hand and moved it to and fro before his face. ‘What do you mean by that? You look at things in a way that would make everything wrong. What sort of a cousin is a cousin that you had never seen for more than twenty years of her life? We’re all each other’s cousins, and if we stopped at that the human race would die out. It’s just the same with your bad lung. You’re a great deal better than you used to be. All you want is to lead a natural life. It is a great deal more natural to marry a pretty young lady that you’re in love with than it is to remain single on false principles.’

‘I’m not in love with Isabel,’ said Ralph.

‘You said just now that you would be if you didn’t think it wrong. I want to prove to you that it isn’t wrong.’

‘It will only tire you, dear daddy,’ said Ralph, who marvelled at his father’s tenacity and at his finding strength to insist. ‘Then where shall we all be?’

‘Where shall you be if I don’t provide for you? You won’t have anything to do with the bank, and you won’t have me to take care of. You say you’ve so many interests; but I can’t make them out.’

Ralph leaned back in his chair with folded arms; his eyes were fixed for some time in meditation. At last, with the air of a man fairly mustering courage, ‘I take a great interest in my cousin,’ he said, ‘but not the sort of interest you desire. I shall not live many years; but I hope I shall live long enough to see what she does with herself. She’s entirely independent of me; I can exercise very little influence upon her life. But I should like to do something for her.’

‘What should you like to do?’

‘I should like to put a little wind in her sails.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘I should like to put it into her power to do some of the things she wants. She wants to see the world for instance. I should like to put money in her purse.’

‘Ah, I’m glad you’ve thought of that,’ said the old man. ‘But I’ve thought of it too. I’ve left her a legacy —five thousand pounds.’

‘That’s capital; it’s very kind of you. But I should like to do a little more.’

Something of that veiled acuteness with which it had been on Daniel Touchett’s part the habit of a lifetime to listen to a financial proposition still lingered in the face in which the invalid had not obliterated the man of happiness. ‘I shall be happy to consider it,’ he said softly.

‘Isabel’s poor then. My mother tells me that she has but a few hundred dollars a year. I should like to make her rich.’

‘What do you mean by rich?’

‘I call people rich when they’re able to meet the requirements of their imagination. Isabel has a great deal of imagination.’

‘So have you, my son,’ said Mr Touchett, listening very attentively but a little confusedly.

‘You tell me I shall have money enough for two. What I want is that you should kindly relieve me of my superfluity and make it over to Isabel. Divide my inheritance into two equal halves and give her the second.’

‘To do what she likes with?’

‘Absolutely what she likes.’

‘And without an equivalent?’

‘What equivalent could there be?’

‘The one I’ve already mentioned.’

‘Her marrying—some one or other? It’s just to do away with anything of that sort that I make my suggestion. If she has an easy income she’ll never have to marry for a support. That’s what I want cannily to prevent. She wishes to be free, and your bequest will make her free.’

‘Well, you seem to have thought it out,’ said Mr Touchett. ‘But I don’t see why you appeal to me. The money will be yours, and you can easily give it to her yourself.’

Ralph openly stared. ‘Ah, dear father, *I* can’t offer Isabel money!’

The old man gave a groan. ‘Don’t tell me you’re not in love with her! Do you want *me* to have the credit of it?’

‘Entirely. I should like it simply to be a clause in your will, without the slightest reference to me.’

‘Do you want me to make a new will then?’

‘A few words will do it; you can attend to it the next time you feel a little lively.’

‘You must telegraph to Mr Hilary then. I’ll do nothing without my solicitor.’

‘You shall see Mr Hilary to-morrow.’

‘He’ll think we’ve quarrelled, you and I,’ said the old man.

‘Very probably; I shall like him to think it,’ said Ralph, smiling; ‘and, to carry out the idea, I give you notice that I shall be very sharp, quite horrid and strange, with you.’

The humour of this appeared to touch his father, who lay a little while taking it in. ‘I’ll do anything you like,’ Mr Touchett said at last; ‘but I’m not sure it’s right. You say you want to put wind in her sails; but aren’t you afraid of putting too much?’

‘I should like to see her going before the breeze!’ Ralph answered.

‘You speak as if it were for your mere amusement.’

‘So it is, a good deal.’

‘Well, I don’t think I understand,’ said Mr Touchett with a sigh. ‘Young men are very different from what I was. When I cared for a girl—when I was young—I wanted to do more than look at her. You’ve scruples that I shouldn’t have had, and you’ve ideas that I shouldn’t have had either. You say Isabel wants to be free, and that her being rich will keep her from marrying for money. Do you think that she’s a girl to do that?’

‘By no means. But she has less money than she has ever had before. Her father then gave her everything, because he used to spend his capital. She has nothing but the crumbs of that feast to live on, and she doesn’t really know how meagre they are—she has yet to learn it. My mother has told me all about it. Isabel will learn it when she’s really thrown upon the world, and it would be very painful to me to think of her coming to the consciousness of a lot of wants she should be unable to satisfy.’

‘I’ve left her five thousand pounds. She can satisfy a good many wants with that.’

‘She can indeed. But she would probably spend it in two or three years.’

‘You think she’d be extravagant then?’

‘Most certainly,’ said Ralph, smiling serenely.

Poor Mr Touchett’s acuteness was rapidly giving place to pure confusion. ‘It would merely be a question of time then, her spending the larger sum?’

‘No—though at first I think she’d plunge into that pretty freely: she’d probably make over a part of it to each of her sisters. But after that she’d come to her senses, remember she has still a lifetime before her, and live within her means.’

‘Well, you *have* worked it out,’ said the old man helplessly. ‘You do take an interest in her, certainly.’

‘You can’t consistently say I go too far. You wished me to go further.’

‘Well, I don’t know,’ Mr Touchett answered. ‘I don’t think I enter into your spirit. It seems to me immoral.’

‘Immoral, dear daddy?’

‘Well, I don’t know that it’s right to make everything so easy for a person.’

‘It surely depends upon the person. When the person’s good, your making things easy is all to the credit of virtue. To facilitate the execution of good impulses, what can be a nobler act?’

This was a little difficult to follow, and Mr Touchett considered it for a while. At last he said: ‘Isabel’s

a sweet young thing; but do you think she's so good as that?'

'She's as good as her best opportunities,' Ralph returned.

'Well,' Mr Touchett declared, 'she ought to get a great many opportunities for sixty thousand pounds.'

'I've no doubt she will.'

'Of course I'll do what you want,' said the old man. 'I only want to understand it a little.'

'Well, dear daddy, don't you understand it now?' his son caressingly asked. 'If you don't we won't take any more trouble about it. We'll leave it alone.'

Mr Touchett lay a long time still. Ralph supposed he had given up the attempt to follow. But at last, quite lucidly, he began again. 'Tell me this first. Doesn't it occur to you that a young lady with sixty thousand pounds may fall a victim to the fortune-hunters?'

'She'll hardly fall a victim to more than one.'

'Well, one's too many.'

'Decidedly. That's a risk, and it has entered into my calculation. I think it's appreciable, but I think it's small, and I'm prepared to take it.'

Poor Mr Touchett's acuteness had passed into perplexity, and his perplexity now passed into admiration. 'Well, you have gone into it!' he repeated. 'But I don't see what good you're to get of it.'

Ralph leaned over his father's pillows and gently smoothed them; he was aware their talk had been unduly prolonged. 'I shall get just the good I said a few moments ago I wished to put into Isabel's reach—that of having met the requirements of my imagination. But it's scandalous, the way I've taken advantage of you!'

XIX

As Mrs Touchett had foretold, Isabel and Madame Merle were thrown much together during the illness of their host, so that if they had not become intimate it would have been almost a breach of good manners. Their manners were of the best, but in addition to this they happened to please each other. It is perhaps too much to say that they swore an eternal friendship, but tacitly at least they called the future to witness. Isabel did so with a perfectly good conscience, though she would have hesitated to admit she was intimate with her new friend in the high sense she privately attached to this term. She often wondered indeed if she ever had been, or ever could be, intimate with any one. She had an ideal of friendship as well as of several other sentiments, which it failed to seem to her in this case—it had not seemed to her in other cases—that the actual completely expressed. But she often reminded herself that there were essential reasons why one's ideal could never become concrete. It was a thing to believe in, not to see—a matter of faith, not of experience. Experience, however, might supply us with very creditable imitations of it, and the part of wisdom was to make the best of these. Certainly, on the whole, Isabel had never encountered a more agreeable and interesting figure than Madame Merle; she had never met a person having less of that fault which is the principal obstacle to friendship—the air of reproducing the more tiresome, the stale, the too-familiar parts of one's own character. The gates of the girl's confidence were opened wider than they had ever been; she said things to this amiable auditress that she had not yet said to any one. Sometimes she took alarm at her candour: it was as if she had given to a comparative stranger the key to her cabinet of jewels. These spiritual gems were the only ones of any magnitude that Isabel possessed, but there was all the greater reason for their being carefully guarded. Afterwards, however, she always remembered that one should never regret a generous error and that if Madame Merle had not the merits she attributed to her, so much the worse for Madame Merle. There was no doubt she had great merits—she was charming, sympathetic, intelligent, cultivated. More than this (for it had not been Isabel's ill-fortune to go through life without meeting in her own sex several persons of whom no less could fairly be said), she was rare, superior and pre-eminent. There are many amiable people in the world, and Madame Merle was far from being vulgarly good natured and restlessly witty. She knew how to think—an accomplishment rare in women; and she had thought to very good purpose. Of course, too, she knew how to feel; Isabel couldn't have spent a week with her without being sure of that. This was indeed Madame Merle's great talent, her most perfect gift. Life had told upon her; she had felt it strongly, and it was part of the satisfaction to be taken in her society that when the girl talked of what she was pleased to call serious matters this lady understood her so easily and quickly. Emotion, it is true, had become with her rather historic; she made no secret of the fact that the fount of passion, thanks to having been rather violently tapped at one period, didn't flow quite so freely as of yore. She proposed moreover, as well as expected, to cease feeling; she freely admitted that of old she had been a little mad, and now she pretended to be perfectly sane.

'I judge more than I used to,' she said to Isabel, 'but it seems to me one has earned the right. One can't judge till one's forty; before that we're too eager, too hard, too cruel, and in addition much too ignorant. I'm sorry for you; it will be a long time before you're forty. But every gain's a loss of some kind; I often think that after forty one *can't* really feel. The freshness, the quickness have certainly gone. You'll keep them longer than most people; it will be a great satisfaction to me to see you some years hence. I want to see what life makes of you. One thing's certain—it can't spoil you. It may pull you about horribly, but I defy it to break you up.'

Isabel received this assurance as a young soldier, still panting from a slight skirmish in which he has come off with honour, might receive a pat on the shoulder from his colonel. Like such a recognition of merit it seemed to come with authority. How could the lightest word do less on the part of a person who was prepared to say, of almost everything Isabel told her, 'Oh, I've been in that, my dear; it passes, like everything else.' On many of her interlocutors Madame Merle might have produced an irritating effect; it was disconcertingly difficult to surprise her. But Isabel, though by no means incapable of desiring to be effective, had not at present this impulse. She was too sincere, too interested in her judicious companion. And then moreover Madame Merle never said such things in the tone of triumph or of boastfulness; they dropped from her like cold confessions.

A period of bad weather had settled upon Gardencourt; the days grew shorter and there was an end to the pretty tea-parties on the lawn. But our young woman had long indoor conversations with her fellow

visitor, and in spite of the rain the two ladies often sallied forth for a walk, equipped with the defensive apparatus which the English climate and the English genius have between them brought to such perfection. Madame Merle liked almost everything, including the English rain. 'There's always a little of it and never too much at once,' she said; 'and it never wets you and it always smells good.' She declared that in England the pleasures of smell were great—that in this inimitable island there was a certain mixture of fog and beer and soot which, however odd it might sound, was the national aroma, and was most agreeable to the nostril; and she used to lift the sleeve of her British overcoat and bury her nose in it, inhaling the clear, fine scent of the wool. Poor Ralph Touchett, as soon as the autumn had begun to define itself, became almost a prisoner; in bad weather he was unable to step out of the house, and he used sometimes to stand at one of the windows with his hands in his pockets and, from a countenance half-rueful, half-critical, watch Isabel and Madame Merle as they walked down the avenue under a pair of umbrellas. The roads about Gardencourt were so firm, even in the worst weather, that the two ladies always came back with a healthy glow in their cheeks, looking at the soles of their neat, stout boots and declaring that their walk had done them inexpressible good. Before luncheon, always, Madame Merle was engaged; Isabel admired and envied her rigid possession of her morning. Our heroine had always passed for a person of resources and had taken a certain pride in being one; but she wandered, as by the wrong side of the wall of a private garden, round the enclosed talents, accomplishments, aptitudes of Madame Merle. She found herself desiring to emulate them, and in twenty such ways this lady presented herself as a model. 'I should like awfully to be *so*!' Isabel secretly exclaimed, more than once, as one after another of her friend's fine aspects caught the light, and before long she knew that she had learned a lesson from a high authority. It took no great time indeed for her to feel herself, as the phrase is, under an influence. 'What's the harm,' she wondered, 'so long as it's a good one? The more one's under a good influence the better. The only thing is to see our steps as we take them—to understand them as we go. That, no doubt, I shall always do. I needn't be afraid of becoming too pliable; isn't it my fault that I'm not pliable enough?' It is said that imitation is the sincerest flattery; and if Isabel was sometimes moved to gape at her friend aspiringly and despairingly it was not so much because she desired herself to shine as because she wished to hold up the lamp for Madame Merle. She liked her extremely, but was even more dazzled than attracted. She sometimes asked herself what Henrietta Stackpole would say to her thinking so much of this perverted product of their common soil, and had a conviction that it would be severely judged. Henrietta would not at all subscribe to Madame Merle; for reasons she could not have defined this truth came home to the girl. On the other hand she was equally sure that, should the occasion offer, her new friend would strike off some happy view of her old: Madame Merle was too humorous, too observant, not to do justice to Henrietta, and on becoming acquainted with her would probably give the measure of a tact which Miss Stackpole couldn't hope to emulate. She appeared to have in her experience a touchstone for everything, and somewhere in the capacious pocket of her genial memory she would find the key to Henrietta's value. 'That's the great thing,' Isabel solemnly pondered; 'that's the supreme good fortune: to be in a better position for appreciating people than they are for appreciating you.' And she added that such, when one considered it, was simply the essence of the aristocratic situation. In this light, if in none other, one should aim at the aristocratic situation.

I may not count over all the links in the chain which led Isabel to think of Madame Merle's situation as aristocratic—a view of it never expressed in any reference made to it by that lady herself. She had known great things and great people, but she had never played a great part. She was one of the small ones of the earth; she had not been born to honours; she knew the world too well to nourish fatuous illusions on the article of her own place in it. She had encountered many of the fortunate few and was perfectly aware of those points at which their fortune differed from hers. But if by her informed measure she was no figure for a high scene, she had yet to Isabel's imagination a sort of greatness. To be so cultivated and civilized, so wise and so easy, and still make so light of it—that was really to be a great lady, especially when one so carried and presented one's self. It was as if somehow she had all society under contribution, and all the arts and graces it practised—or was the effect rather that of charming uses found for her, even from a distance, subtle service rendered by her to a clamorous world wherever she might be? After breakfast she wrote a succession of letters, as those arriving for her appeared innumerable: her correspondence was a source of surprise to Isabel when they sometimes walked together to the village post-office to deposit Madame Merle's offering to the mail. She knew more people, as she told Isabel, than she knew what to do with, and something was always turning up to be written about. Of painting she was devotedly fond, and made no more of brushing in a sketch than of pulling off her gloves. At Gardencourt she was perpetually taking advantage of an hour's sunshine to go out with a camp-stool and a box of water-colours. That she was a brave musician we have already perceived, and it was evidence of the fact that when she seated herself at the piano, as she always did in the evening, her

listeners resigned themselves without a murmur to losing the grace of her talk. Isabel, since she had known her, felt ashamed of her own facility, which she now looked upon as basely inferior; and indeed, though she had been thought rather a prodigy at home, the loss to society when, in taking her place upon the music-stool, she turned her back to the room, was usually deemed greater than the gain. When Madame Merle was neither writing, nor painting, nor touching the piano, she was usually employed upon wonderful tasks of rich embroidery, cushions, curtains, decorations for the chimneypiece; an art in which her bold, free invention was as noted as the agility of her needle. She was never idle, for when engaged in none of the ways I have mentioned she was either reading (she appeared to Isabel to read 'everything important'), or walking out, or playing patience with the cards, or talking with her fellow inmates. And with all this she had always the social quality, was never rudely absent and yet never too seated. She laid down her pastimes as easily as she took them up; she worked and talked at the same time, and appeared to impute scant worth to anything she did. She gave away her sketches and tapestries; she rose from the piano or remained there, according to the convenience of her auditors, which she always unerringly divined. She was in short the most comfortable, profitable, amenable person to live with. If for Isabel she had a fault it was that she was not natural; by which the girl meant, not that she was either affected or pretentious, since from these vulgar vices no woman could have been more exempt, but that her nature had been too much overlaid by custom and her angles too much rubbed away. She had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final. She was in a word too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be; and she had rid herself of every remnant of that tonic wildness which we may assume to have belonged even to the most amiable persons in the ages before country-house life was the fashion. Isabel found it difficult to think of her in any detachment or privacy, she existed only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals. One might wonder what commerce she could possibly hold with her own spirit. One always ended, however, by feeling that a charming surface doesn't necessarily prove one superficial; this was an illusion in which, in one's youth, one had but just escaped being nourished. Madame Merle was not superficial—not she. She was deep, and her nature spoke none the less in her behaviour because it spoke a conventional tongue. 'What's language at all but a convention?' said Isabel. 'She has the good taste not to pretend, like some people I've met, to express herself by original signs.'

'I'm afraid you've suffered much,' she once found occasion to say to her friend in response to some allusion that had appeared to reach far.

'What makes you think that?' Madame Merle asked with the amused smile of a person seated at a game of guesses. 'I hope I haven't too much the droop of the misunderstood.'

'No; but you sometimes say things that I think people who have always been happy wouldn't have found out.'

'I haven't always been happy,' said Madame Merle, smiling still, but with a mock gravity, as if she were telling a child a secret. 'Such a wonderful thing!'

But Isabel rose to the irony. 'A great many people give me the impression of never having for a moment felt anything.'

'It's very true; there are many more iron pots certainly than porcelain. But you may depend on it that every one bears some mark; even the hardest iron pots have a little bruise, a little hole somewhere. I flatter myself that I'm rather stout, but if I must tell you the truth I've been shockingly chipped and cracked. I do very well for service yet, because I've been cleverly mended; and I try to remain in the cupboard—the quiet, dusky cupboard where there's an odour of stale spices—as much as I can. But when I've to come out and into a strong light—then, my dear, I'm a horror!'

I know not whether it was on this occasion or on some other that when the conversation had taken the turn I have just indicated she said to Isabel that she would some day a tale unfold.* Isabel assured her she should delight to listen to one, and reminded her more than once of this engagement. Madame Merle, however, begged repeatedly for a respite, and at last frankly told her young companion that they must wait till they knew each other better. This would be sure to happen; a long friendship so visibly lay before them. Isabel assented, but at the same time enquired if she mightn't be trusted—if she appeared capable of a betrayal of confidence.

'It's not that I'm afraid of your repeating what I say,' her fellow visitor answered; 'I'm afraid, on the contrary, of your taking it too much to yourself. You'd judge me too harshly; you're of the cruel age.' She preferred for the present to talk to Isabel of Isabel, and exhibited the greatest interest in our heroine's history, sentiments, opinions, prospects. She made her chatter and listened to her chatter with infinite good nature. This flattered and quickened the girl, who was struck with all the distinguished people her friend had known and with her having lived, as Mrs Touchett said, in the best company in Europe. Isabel

thought the better of herself for enjoying the favour of a person who had so large a field of comparison; and it was perhaps partly to gratify the sense of profiting by comparison that she often appealed to these stores of reminiscence. Madame Merle had been a dweller in many lands and had social ties in a dozen different countries. 'I don't pretend to be educated,' she would say, 'but I think I know my Europe;' and she spoke one day of going to Sweden to stay with an old friend, and another of proceeding to Malta to follow up a new acquaintance. With England, where she had often dwelt, she was thoroughly familiar, and for Isabel's benefit threw a great deal of light upon the customs of the country and the character of the people, who 'after all,' as she was fond of saying, were the most convenient in the world to live with.

'You mustn't think it strange her remaining here at such a time as this, when Mr Touchett's passing away,' that gentleman's wife remarked to her niece. 'She is incapable of a mistake; she's the most tactful woman I know. It's a favour to me that she stays; she's putting off a lot of visits at great houses,' said Mrs Touchett, who never forgot that when she herself was in England her social value sank two or three degrees in the scale. 'She has her pick of places; she's not in want of a shelter. But I've asked her to put in this time because I wish you to know her. I think it will be a good thing for you. Serena Merle hasn't a fault.'

'If I didn't already like her very much that description might alarm me,' Isabel returned.

'She's never the least little bit "off." I've brought you out here and I wish to do the best for you. Your sister Lily told me she hoped I would give you plenty of opportunities. I give you one in putting you in relation with Madame Merle. She's one of the most brilliant women in Europe.'

'I like her better than I like your description of her,' Isabel persisted in saying.

'Do you flatter yourself that you'll ever feel her open to criticism? I hope you'll let me know when you do.'

'That will be cruel—to you,' said Isabel.

'You needn't mind me. You won't discover a fault in her.'

'Perhaps not. But I dare say I shan't miss it.'

'She knows absolutely everything on earth there is to know,' said Mrs Touchett.

Isabel after this observed to their companion that she hoped she knew Mrs Touchett considered she hadn't a speck on her perfection. On which 'I'm obliged to you,' Madame Merle replied, 'but I'm afraid your aunt imagines, or at least alludes to, no aberrations* that the clock-face doesn't register.'

'So that you mean you've a wild side that's unknown to her?'

'Ah no, I fear my darkest sides are my tamest. I mean that having no faults, for your aunt, means that one's never late for dinner—that is for *her* dinner. I was not late, by the way, the other day, when you came back from London; the clock was just at eight when I came into the drawing-room; it was the rest of you that were before the time. It means that one answers a letter the day one gets it and that when one comes to stay with her one doesn't bring too much luggage and is careful not to be taken ill. For Mrs Touchett those things constitute virtue; it's a blessing to be able to reduce it to its elements.'

Madame Merle's own conversation, it will be perceived, was enriched with bold, free touches of criticism, which, even when they had a restrictive effect, never struck Isabel as ill-natured. It couldn't occur to the girl for instance that Mrs Touchett's accomplished guest was abusing her; and this for very good reasons. In the first place Isabel rose eagerly to the sense of her shades; in the second Madame Merle implied that there was a great deal more to say; and it was clear in the third that for a person to speak to one without ceremony of one's near relations was an agreeable sign of that person's intimacy with one's self. These signs of deep communion multiplied as the days elapsed, and there was none of which Isabel was more sensible than of her companion's preference for making Miss Archer herself a topic. Though she referred frequently to the incidents of her own career she never lingered upon them; she was as little of a gross egotist as she was of a flat gossip.

'I'm old and stale and faded,' she said more than once; 'I'm of no more interest than last week's newspaper. You're young and fresh and of to-day; you've the great thing—you've actuality. I once had it—we all have it for an hour. You, however, will have it for longer. Let us talk about you then; you can say nothing I shall not care to hear. It's a sign that I'm growing old—that I like to talk with younger people. I think it's a very pretty compensation. If we can't have youth within us we can have it outside, and I really think we see it and feel it better that way. Of course we must be in sympathy with it—that I shall always be. I don't know that I shall ever be ill-natured with old people—I hope not; there are certainly some old people I adore. But I shall never be anything but abject with the young; they touch me and appeal to me too much. I give you *carte blanche** then; you can even be impertinent if you like; I shall let it pass and horribly spoil you. I speak as if I were a hundred years old, you say? Well, I am, if you

please; I was born before the French Revolution. Ah, my dear, *je viens de loin*;* I belong to the old, old world. But it's not of that I want to talk; I want to talk about the new. You must tell me more about America; you never tell me enough. Here I've been since I was brought here as a helpless child, and it's ridiculous, or rather it's scandalous, how little I know about that splendid, dreadful, funny country—surely the greatest and drollest of them all. There are a great many of us like that in these parts, and I must say I think we're a wretched set of people. You should live in your own land; whatever it may be you have your natural place there. If we're not good Americans we're certainly poor Europeans; we've no natural place here. We're mere parasites, crawling over the surface; we haven't our feet in the soil. At least one can know it and not have illusions. A woman perhaps can get on; a woman, it seems to me, has no natural place anywhere; wherever she finds herself she has to remain on the surface and, more or less, to crawl. You protest, my dear? you're horrified? you declare you'll never crawl? It's very true that I don't see you crawling; you stand more upright than a good many poor creatures. Very good; on the whole, I don't think you'll crawl. But the men, the Americans; *je vous demande un peu*,* what do they make of it over here? I don't envy them trying to arrange themselves. Look at poor Ralph Touchett: what sort of a figure do you call that? Fortunately he has a consumption; I say fortunately, because it gives him something to do. His consumption's his *carrière*;* it's a kind of position. You can say: "Oh Mr Touchett, he takes care of his lungs, he knows a great deal about climates." But without that who would he be, what would he represent? "Mr Ralph Touchett: an American who lives in Europe." That signifies absolutely nothing—it's impossible anything should signify less. "He's very cultivated," they say: "he has a very pretty collection of old snuff-boxes." The collection is all that's wanted to make it pitiful. I'm tired of the sound of the word; I think it's grotesque. With the poor old father it's different; he has his identity, and it's rather a massive one. He represents a great financial house, and that, in our day, is as good as anything else. For an American, at any rate, that will do very well. But I persist in thinking your cousin very lucky to have a chronic malady so long as he doesn't die of it. It's much better than the snuff-boxes. If he weren't ill, you say, he'd do something?—he'd take his father's place in the house. My poor child, I doubt it; I don't think he's at all fond of the house. However, you know him better than I, though I used to know him rather well, and he may have the benefit of the doubt. The worst case, I think, is a friend of mine, a countryman of ours, who lives in Italy (where he also was brought before he knew better), and who is one of the most delightful men I know. Some day you must know him. I'll bring you together and then you'll see what I mean. He's Gilbert Osmond—he lives in Italy; that's all one can say about him or make of him. He's exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished; but, as I tell you, you exhaust the description when you say he's Mr Osmond who lives *tout bêtement** in Italy. No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything. Oh yes, he paints, if you please—paints in water-colours; like me, only better than I. His painting's pretty bad; on the whole I'm rather glad of that. Fortunately he's very indolent, so indolent that it amounts to a sort of position. He can say, "Oh, I do nothing; I'm too deadly lazy. You can do nothing to-day unless you get up at five o'clock in the morning." In that way he becomes a sort of exception; you feel he might do something if he'd only rise early. He never speaks of his painting—to people at large; he's too clever for that. But he has a little girl—a dear little girl; he does speak of *her*. He's devoted to her, and if it were a career to be an excellent father he'd be very distinguished. But I'm afraid that's no better than the snuff-boxes; perhaps not even so good. Tell me what they do in America,' pursued Madame Merle, who, it must be observed parenthetically, did not deliver herself all at once of these reflexions, which are presented in a cluster for the convenience of the reader. She talked of Florence, where Mr Osmond lived and where Mrs Touchett occupied a mediæval palace; she talked of Rome, where she herself had a little *pied–à–terre* with some rather good old damask. She talked of places, of people and even, as the phrase is, of 'subjects'; and from time to time she talked of their kind old host and of the prospect of his recovery. From the first she had thought this prospect small, and Isabel had been struck with the positive, discriminating, competent way in which she took the measure of his remainder of life. One evening she announced definitely that he wouldn't live.

'Sir Matthew Hope told me so as plainly as was proper,' she said; 'standing there, near the fire, before dinner. He makes himself very agreeable, the great doctor. I don't mean his saying that has anything to do with it. But he says such things with great tact. I had told him I felt ill at my ease, staying here at such a time; it seemed to me so indiscreet—it wasn't as if I could nurse. "You must remain, you must remain," he answered; "your office will come later." Wasn't that a very delicate way of saying both that poor Mr Touchett would go and that I might be of some use as a consoler? In fact, however, I shall not be of the slightest use. Your aunt will console herself; she, and she alone, knows just how much consolation she'll require. It would be a very delicate matter for another person to undertake to administer the dose. With your cousin it will be different; he'll miss his father immensely. But I should never presume to condole with Mr Ralph; we're not on those terms.' Madame Merle had alluded more than once to some undefined

incongruity in her relations with Ralph Touchett; so Isabel took this occasion of asking her if they were not good friends.

'Perfectly, but he doesn't like me.'

'What have you done to him?'

'Nothing whatever. But one has no need of a reason for that.'

'For not liking you? I think one has need of a very good reason.'

'You're very kind. Be sure you have one ready for the day you begin.'

'Begin to dislike you? I shall never begin.'

'I hope not; because if you do you'll never end. That's the way with your cousin; he doesn't get over it. It's an antipathy of nature—if I can call it that when it's all on his side. I've nothing whatever against him and don't bear him the least little grudge for not doing me justice. Justice is all I want. However, one feels that he's a gentleman and would never say anything underhand about one. *Cartes sur table*,'* Madame Merle subjoined in a moment, 'I'm not afraid of him.'

'I hope not indeed,' said Isabel, who added something about his being the kindest creature living. She remembered, however, that on her first asking him about Madame Merle he had answered her in a manner which this lady might have thought injurious without being explicit. There was something between them, Isabel said to herself, but she said nothing more than this. If it were something of importance it should inspire respect; if it were not it was not worth her curiosity. With all her love of knowledge she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners. The love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance.

But Madame Merle sometimes said things that startled her, made her raise her clear eyebrows at the time and think of the words afterwards. 'I'd give a great deal to be your age again,' she broke out once with a bitterness which, though diluted in her customary amplitude of ease, was imperfectly disguised by it. 'If I could only begin again—if I could have my life before me!'

'Your life's before you yet,' Isabel answered gently, for she was vaguely awe-struck.

'No; the best part's gone, and gone for nothing.'

'Surely not for nothing,' said Isabel.

'Why not—what have I got? Neither husband, nor child, nor fortune, nor position, nor the traces of a beauty that I never had.'

'You have many friends, dear lady.'

'I'm not so sure!' cried Madame Merle.

'Ah, you're wrong. You have memories, graces, talents——'

But Madame Merle interrupted her. 'What have my talents brought me? Nothing but the need of using them still, to get through the hours, the years, to cheat myself with some pretence of movement, of unconsciousness. As for my graces and memories the less said about them the better. You'll be my friend till you find a better use for your friendship.'

'It will be for you to see that I don't then,' said Isabel.

'Yes; I would make an effort to keep you.' And her companion looked at her gravely. 'When I say I should like to be your age I mean with your qualities—frank, generous, sincere like you. In that case I should have made something better of my life.'

'What should you have liked to do that you've not done?'

Madame Merle took a sheet of music—she was seated at the piano and had abruptly wheeled about on the stool when she first spoke—and mechanically turned the leaves. 'I'm very ambitious!' she at last replied.

'And your ambitions have not been satisfied? They must have been great.'

'They *were* great. I should make myself ridiculous by talking of them.'

Isabel wondered what they could have been—whether Madame Merle had aspired to wear a crown. 'I don't know what your idea of success may be, but you seem to me to have been successful. To me indeed you're a vivid image of success.'

Madame Merle tossed away the music with a smile. 'What's *your* idea of success?'

'You evidently think it must be a very tame one. It's to see some dream of one's youth come true.'

'Ah,' Madame Merle exclaimed, 'that I've never seen! But my dreams were so great—so preposterous. Heaven forgive me, I'm dreaming now!' And she turned back to the piano and began grandly to play. On the morrow she said to Isabel that her definition of success had been very pretty, yet frightfully sad.

Measured in that way, who had succeeded? The dreams of one's youth, why they were enchanting, they were divine! Who had ever seen such things come to pass?

'I myself—a few of them,' Isabel ventured to answer.

'Already? They must have been dreams of yesterday.'

'I began to dream very young,' Isabel smiled.

'Ah, if you mean the aspirations of your childhood—that of having a pink sash and a doll that could close her eyes.'

'No, I don't mean that.'

'Or a young man with a fine moustache going down on his knees to you.'

'No, nor that either,' Isabel declared with still more emphasis.

Madame Merle appeared to note this eagerness. 'I suspect that's what you do mean. We've all had the young man with the moustache. He's the inevitable young man; he doesn't count.'

Isabel was silent a little but then spoke with extreme and characteristic inconsequence. 'Why shouldn't he count? There are young men and young men.'

'And yours was a paragon—is that what you mean?' asked her friend with a laugh. 'If you've had the identical young man you dreamed of, then that was success, and I congratulate you with all my heart. Only in that case why didn't you fly with him to his castle in the Apennines?'

'He has no castle in the Apennines.'

'What has he? An ugly brick house in Fortieth Street? Don't tell me that; I refuse to recognise that as an ideal.'

'I don't care anything about his house,' said Isabel.

'That's very crude of you. When you've lived as long as I you'll see that every human being has his shell and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There's no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we're each of us made up of some cluster of appurtenances.* What shall we call our "self"? Where does it begin? where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know a large part of myself is in the clothes I choose to wear. I've a great respect for things! One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive.'

This was very metaphysical; not more so, however, than several observations Madame Merle had already made. Isabel was fond of metaphysics, but was unable to accompany her friend into this bold analysis of the human personality. 'I don't agree with you. I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me.* Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!'

'You dress very well,' Madame Merle lightly interposed.

'Possibly; but I don't care to be judged by that. My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society.'

'Should you prefer to go without them?' Madame Merle enquired in a tone which virtually terminated the discussion.

I am bound to confess, though it may cast some discredit on the sketch I have given of the youthful loyalty practised by our heroine toward this accomplished woman, that Isabel had said nothing whatever to her about Lord Warburton and had been equally reticent on the subject of Caspar Goodwood. She had not, however, concealed the fact that she had had opportunities of marrying and had even let her friend know of how advantageous a kind they had been. Lord Warburton had left Lockleigh and was gone to Scotland, taking his sisters with him; and though he had written to Ralph more than once to ask about Mr Touchett's health the girl was not liable to the embarrassment of such enquiries as, had he still been in the neighbourhood, he would probably have felt bound to make in person. He had excellent ways, but she felt sure that if he had come to Gardencourt he would have seen Madame Merle, and that if he had seen her he would have liked her and betrayed to her that he was in love with her young friend. It so happened that during this lady's previous visits to Gardencourt—each of them much shorter than the present—he had either not been at Lockleigh or had not called at Mr Touchett's. Therefore, though she knew him by name as the great man of that country, she had no cause to suspect him as a suitor of Mrs Touchett's freshly-imported niece.

‘You’ve plenty of time,’ she had said to Isabel in return for the mutilated confidences which our young woman made her and which didn’t pretend to be perfect, though we have seen that at moments the girl had compunctions at having said so much. ‘I’m glad you’ve done nothing yet—that you have it still to do. It’s a very good thing for a girl to have refused a few good offers—so long of course as they are not the best she’s likely to have. Pardon me if my tone seems horribly corrupt; one must take the worldly view sometimes. Only don’t keep on refusing for the sake of refusing. It’s a pleasant exercise of power; but accepting’s after all an exercise of power as well. There’s always the danger of refusing once too often. It was not the one I fell into—I didn’t refuse often enough. You’re an exquisite creature, and I should like to see you married to a prime minister. But speaking strictly, you know, you’re not what is technically called *a parti*.* You’re extremely good-looking and extremely clever; in yourself you’re quite exceptional. You appear to have the vaguest ideas about your earthly possessions; but from what I can make out you’re not embarrassed with an income. I wish you had a little money.’

‘I wish I had!’ said Isabel, simply, apparently forgetting for the moment that her poverty had been a venial fault for two gallant gentlemen.

In spite of Sir Matthew Hope’s benevolent recommendation Madame Merle did not remain to the end, as the issue of poor Mr Touchett’s malady had now come frankly to be designated. She was under pledges to other people which had at last to be redeemed, and she left Gardencourt with the understanding that she should in any event see Mrs Touchett there again, or else in town, before quitting England. Her parting with Isabel was even more like the beginning of a friendship than their meeting had been. ‘I’m going to six places in succession, but I shall see no one I like so well as you. They’ll all be old friends, however; one doesn’t make new friends at my age. I’ve made a great exception for you. You must remember that and must think as well of me as possible. You must reward me by believing in me.’

By way of answer Isabel kissed her, and, though some women kiss with facility, there are kisses and kisses, and this embrace was satisfactory to Madame Merle. Our young lady, after this, was much alone; she saw her aunt and cousin only at meals, and discovered that of the hours during which Mrs Touchett was invisible only a minor portion was now devoted to nursing her husband. She spent the rest in her own apartments, to which access was not allowed even to her niece, apparently occupied there with mysterious and inscrutable exercises. At table she was grave and silent; but her solemnity was not an attitude—Isabel could see it was a conviction. She wondered if her aunt repented of having taken her own way so much; but there was no visible evidence of this—no tears, no sighs, no exaggeration of a zeal always to its own sense adequate. Mrs Touchett seemed simply to feel the need of thinking things over and summing them up; she had a little moral account-book—with columns unerringly ruled and a sharp steel clasp—which she kept with exemplary neatness. Uttered reflection had with her ever, at any rate, a practical ring. ‘If I had foreseen this I’d not have proposed your coming abroad now,’ she said to Isabel after Madame Merle had left the house. ‘I’d have waited and sent for you next year.’

‘So that perhaps I should never have known my uncle? It’s a great happiness to me to have come now.’

‘That’s very well. But it was not that you might know your uncle that I brought you to Europe.’ A perfectly veracious speech; but, as Isabel thought, not as perfectly timed. She had leisure to think of this and other matters. She took a solitary walk every day and spent vague hours in turning over books in the library. Among the subjects that engaged her attention were the adventures of her friend Miss Stackpole, with whom she was in regular correspondence. Isabel liked her friend’s private epistolary style better than her public; that is she felt her public letters would have been excellent if they had not been printed. Henrietta’s career, however, was not so successful, as might have been wished even in the interest of her private felicity; that view of the inner life of Great Britain which she was so eager to take appeared to dance before her like an *ignis fatuus*.* The invitation from Lady Pensil, for mysterious reasons, had never arrived; and poor Mr Bantling himself, with all his friendly ingenuity, had been unable to explain so grave a dereliction on the part of a missive that had obviously been sent. He had evidently taken Henrietta’s affairs much to heart, and believed that he owed her a set-off to this illusory visit to Bedfordshire. ‘He says he should think I would go to the Continent,’ Henrietta wrote; and as he thinks of going there himself I suppose his advice is sincere. He wants to know why I don’t take a view of French life; and it’s a fact that I want very much to see the new Republic.* Mr Bantling doesn’t care much about the Republic, but he thinks of going over to Paris anyway. I must say he’s quite as attentive as I could wish, and at least I shall have seen one polite Englishman. I keep telling Mr Bantling that he ought to have been an American, and you should see how that pleases him. Whenever I say so he always breaks out with the same exclamation—“Ah, but really, come now!”’ A few days later she wrote that she had decided to go to Paris at the end of the week and that Mr Bantling had promised to see her off, perhaps

even would go as far as Dover with her. She would wait in Paris till Isabel should arrive, Henrietta added; speaking quite as if Isabel were to start on her continental journey alone and making no allusion to Mrs Touchett. Bearing in mind his interest in their late companion, our heroine communicated several passages from this correspondence to Ralph, who followed with an emotion akin to suspense the career of the representative of the *Interviewer*.

'It seems to me she's doing very well,' he said, 'going over to Paris with an ex-Lancer!* If she wants something to write about she has only to describe that episode.'

'It's not conventional, certainly,' Isabel answered; 'but if you mean that—as far as Henrietta is concerned—it's not perfectly innocent, you're very much mistaken. You'll never understand Henrietta.'

'Pardon me, I understand her perfectly. I didn't at all at first, but now I've the point of view. I'm afraid, however, that Bantling hasn't; he may have some surprises. Oh, I understand Henrietta as well as if I had made her!'

Isabel was by no means sure of this, but she abstained from expressing further doubt, for she was disposed in these days to extend a great charity to her cousin. One afternoon less than a week after Madame Merle's departure she was seated in the library with a volume to which her attention was not fastened. She had placed herself in a deep window-bench, from which she looked out into the dull, damp park; and as the library stood at right angles to the entrance-front of the house she could see the doctor's brougham, which had been waiting for the last two hours before the door. She was struck with his remaining so long, but at last she saw him appear in the portico, stand a moment slowly drawing on his gloves and looking at the knees of his horse, and then get into the vehicle and roll away. Isabel kept her place for half an hour; there was a great stillness in the house. It was so great that when she at last heard a soft, slow step on the deep carpet of the room she was almost startled by the sound. She turned quickly away from the window and saw Ralph Touchett standing there with his hands still in his pockets, but with a face absolutely void of its usual latent smile. She got up and her movement and glance were a question.

'It's all over,' said Ralph.

'Do you mean that my uncle—?' And Isabel stopped.

'My dear father died an hour ago.'

'Ah, my poor Ralph!' she gently wailed, putting out her two hands to him.

XX

SOME fortnight after this Madame Merle drove up in a hansom cab to the house in Winchester Square. As she descended from her vehicle she observed, suspended between the dining-room windows, a large, neat, wooden tablet, on whose fresh black ground were inscribed in white paint the words—'This noble freehold mansion to be sold'; with the name of the agent to whom application should be made. 'They certainly lose no time,' said the visitor as, after sounding the big brass knocker, she waited to be admitted; 'it's a practical country!' And within the house, as she ascended to the drawingroom, she perceived numerous signs of abdication; pictures removed from the walls and placed upon sofas, windows undraped and floors laid bare. Mrs Touchett presently received her and intimated in a few words that condolences might be taken for granted.

'I know what you're going to say—he was a very good man. But I know it better than any one, because I gave him more chance to show it. In that I think I was a good wife.' Mrs Touchett added that at the end her husband apparently recognised this fact. 'He has treated me most liberally,' she said; 'I won't say more liberally than I expected, because I didn't expect. You know that as a general thing I don't expect. But he chose, I presume, to recognise the fact that though I lived much abroad and mingled—you may say freely—in foreign life, I never exhibited the smallest preference for any one else.'

'For any one but yourself,' Madame Merle mentally observed; but the reflexion was perfectly inaudible.

'I never sacrificed my husband to another,' Mrs Touchett continued with her stout curtness.

'Oh no,' thought Madame Merle; 'you never did anything for another!'

There was a certain cynicism in these mute comments which demands an explanation; the more so as they are not in accord either with the view—somewhat superficial perhaps—that we have hitherto enjoyed of Madame Merle's character or with the literal facts of Mrs Touchett's history; the more so, too, as Madame Merle had a well-founded conviction that her friend's last remark was not in the least to be construed as a side-thrust at herself. The truth is that the moment she had crossed the threshold she received an impression that Mr Touchett's death had had subtle consequences and that these consequences had been profitable to a little circle of persons among whom she was not numbered. Of course it was an event which would naturally have consequences; her imagination had more than once rested upon this fact during her stay at Gardencourt. But it had been one thing to foresee such a matter mentally and another to stand among its massive records. The idea of a distribution of property—she would almost have said of spoils—just now pressed upon her senses and irritated her with a sense of exclusion. I am far from wishing to picture her as one of the hungry mouths or envious hearts of the general herd, but we have already learned of her having desires that had never been satisfied. If she had been questioned, she would of course have admitted—with a fine proud smile—that she had not the faintest claim to a share in Mr Touchett's relics. 'There was never anything in the world between us,' she would have said. 'There was never that, poor man!'—with a fillip of her thumb and her third finger. I hasten to add, moreover, that if she couldn't at the present moment keep from quite perversely yearning she was careful not to betray herself. She had after all as much sympathy for Mrs Touchett's gain as for her losses.

'He has left me this house,' the newly-made widow said; 'but of course I shall not live in it; I've a much better one in Florence. The will was opened only three days since, but I've already offered the house for sale. I've also a share in the bank; but I don't yet understand if I'm obliged to leave it there. If not I shall certainly take it out. Ralph, of course, has Gardencourt; but I'm not sure that he'll have means to keep up the place. He's naturally left very well off, but his father has given away an immense deal of money; there are bequests to a string of third cousins in Vermont. Ralph, however, is very fond of Gardencourt and would be quite capable of living there—in summer—with a maid-of–all-work and a gardener's boy. There's one remarkable clause in my husband's will,' Mrs Touchett added. 'He has left my niece a fortune.'

'A fortune!' Madame Merle softly repeated.

'Isabel steps into something like seventy thousand pounds.'

'Madame Merle's hands were clasped in her lap; at this she raised them, still clasped, and held them a moment against her bosom while her eyes, a little dilated, fixed themselves on those of her friend. 'Ah,'

she cried, ‘the clever creature!’

Mrs Touchett gave her a quick look. ‘What do you mean by that?’

For an instant Madame Merle’s colour rose and she dropped her eyes. ‘It certainly is clever to achieve such results—without an effort!’

‘There assuredly was no effort. Don’t call it an achievement.’

Madame Merle was seldom guilty of the awkwardness of retracting what she had said; her wisdom was shown rather in maintaining it and placing it in a favourable light. ‘My dear friend, Isabel would certainly not have had seventy thousand pounds left her if she had not been the most charming girl in the world. Her charm includes great cleverness.’

‘She never dreamed, I’m sure, of my husband’s doing anything for her; and I never dreamed of it either, for he never spoke to me of his intention,’ Mrs Touchett said. ‘She had no claim upon him whatever; it was no great recommendation to him that she was my niece. Whatever she achieved she achieved unconsciously.’

‘Ah,’ rejoined Madame Merle, ‘those are the greatest strokes!’

Mrs Touchett reserved her opinion. ‘The girl’s fortunate; I don’t deny that. But for the present she’s simply stupefied.’

‘Do you mean that she doesn’t know what to do with the money?’

‘That, I think, she has hardly considered. She doesn’t know what to think about the matter at all. It has been as if a big gun were suddenly fired off behind her; she’s feeling herself to see if she be hurt. It’s but three days since she received a visit from the principal executor, who came in person, very gallantly, to notify her. He told me afterwards that when he had made his little speech she suddenly burst into tears. The money’s to remain in the affairs of the bank, and she’s to draw the interest.’

Madame Merle shook her head with a wise and now quite benignant smile. ‘How very delicious! After she has done that two or three times she’ll get used to it.’ Then after a silence, ‘What does your son think of it?’ she abruptly asked.

‘He left England before the will was read—used up by his fatigue and anxiety and hurrying off to the south. He’s on his way to the Riviera and I’ve not yet heard from him. But it’s not likely he’ll ever object to anything done by his father.’

‘Didn’t you say his own share had been cut down?’

‘Only at his wish. I know that he urged his father to do something for the people in America. He’s not in the least addicted to looking after number one.’

‘It depends upon whom he regards as number one!’ said Madame Merle. And she remained thoughtful a moment, her eyes bent on the floor. ‘Am I not to see your happy niece?’ she asked at last as she raised them.

‘You may see her; but you’ll not be struck with her being happy. She has looked as solemn, these three days, as a Cimabue Madonna!’* And Mrs Touchett rang for a servant.

Isabel came in shortly after the footman had been sent to call her; and Madame Merle thought, as she appeared, that Mrs Touchett’s comparison had its force. The girl was pale and grave—an effect not mitigated by her deeper mourning; but the smile of her brightest moments came into her face as she saw Madame Merle, who went forward, laid her hand on our heroine’s shoulder and, after looking at her a moment, kissed her as if she were returning the kiss she had received from her at Gardencourt. This was the only allusion the visitor, in her great good taste, made for the present to her young friend’s inheritance.

Mrs Touchett had no purpose of awaiting in London the sale of her house. After selecting from among its furniture the objects she wished to transport to her other abode, she left the rest of its contents to be disposed of by the auctioneer and took her departure for the Continent. She was of course accompanied on this journey by her niece, who now had plenty of leisure to measure and weigh and otherwise handle the windfall on which Madame Merle had covertly congratulated her. Isabel thought very often of the fact of her accession of means, looking at it in a dozen different lights; but we shall not now attempt to follow her train of thought or to explain exactly why her new consciousness was at first oppressive. This failure to rise to immediate joy was indeed but brief; the girl presently made up her mind that to be rich was a virtue because it was to be able to do, and that to do could only be sweet. It was the graceful contrary of the stupid side of weakness—especially the feminine variety. To be weak was, for a delicate young person, rather graceful, but, after all, as Isabel said to herself, there was a larger grace than that. Just now, it is true, there was not much to do—once she had sent off a cheque to Lily, and another to

poor Edith; but she was thankful for the quiet months which her mourning robes and her aunt's fresh widowhood compelled them to spend together. The acquisition of power made her serious; she scrutinised her power with a kind of tender ferocity, but was not eager to exercise it. She began to do so during a stay of some weeks which she eventually made with her aunt in Paris, though in ways that will inevitably present themselves as trivial. They were the ways most naturally imposed in a city in which the shops are the admiration of the world, and that were prescribed unreservedly by the guidance of Mrs Touchett, who took a rigidly practical view of the transformation of her niece from a poor girl to a rich one. 'Now that you're a young woman of fortune you must know how to play the part—I mean to play it well,' she said to Isabel once for all; and she added that the girl's first duty was to have everything handsome. 'You don't know how to take care of your things, but you must learn,' she went on; this was Isabel's second duty. Isabel submitted, but for the present her imagination was not kindled; she longed for opportunities, but these were not the opportunities she meant.

Mrs Touchett rarely changed her plans, and, having intended before her husband's death to spend a part of the winter in Paris, saw no reason to deprive herself—still less to deprive her companion-of this advantage. Though they would live in great retirement she might still present her niece, informally, to the little circle of her fellow countrymen dwelling upon the skirts of the Champs Elysées. With many of these amiable colonists Mrs Touchett was intimate; she shared their expatriation, their convictions, their pastimes, their ennui. Isabel saw them arrive with a good deal of assiduity at her aunt's hotel, and pronounced on them with a trenchancy doubtless to be accounted for by the temporary exaltation of her sense of human duty. She made up her mind that their lives were, though luxurious, inane, and incurred some disfavour by expressing this view on bright Sunday afternoons, when the American absentees were engaged in calling on each other. Though her listeners passed for people kept exemplarily genial by their cooks and dressmakers, two or three of them thought her cleverness, which was generally admitted, inferior to that of the new theatrical pieces. 'You all live here this way, but what does it lead to?' she was pleased to ask. 'It doesn't seem to lead to anything, and I should think you'd get very tired of it.'

Mrs Touchett thought the question worthy of Henrietta Stackpole. The two ladies had found Henrietta in Paris, and Isabel constantly saw her; so that Mrs Touchett had some reason for saying to herself that if her niece were not clever enough to originate almost anything, she might be suspected of having borrowed that style of remark from her journalistic friend. The first occasion on which Isabel had spoken was that of a visit paid by the two ladies to Mrs Luce, an old friend of Mrs Touchett's and the only person in Paris she now went to see. Mrs Luce had been living in Paris since the days of Louis Philippe;* she used to say jocosely that she was one of the generation of 1830—a joke of which the point was not always taken. When it failed Mrs Luce used to explain—'Oh yes, I'm one of the romantics;' her French had never become quite perfect. She was always at home on Sunday afternoons and surrounded by sympathetic compatriots, usually the same. In fact she was at home at all times, and reproduced with wondrous truth in her well-cushioned little corner of the brilliant city, the domestic tone of her native Baltimore. This reduced Mr Luce, her worthy husband, a tall, lean, grizzled, wellbrushed gentleman who wore a gold eye-glass and carried his hat a little too much on the back of his head, to mere platonic praise of the 'distractions' of Paris—they were his great word—since you would never have guessed from what cares he escaped to them. One of them was that he went every day to the American banker's, where he found a post-office that was almost as sociable and colloquial an institution as in an American country town. He passed an hour (in fine weather) in a chair in the Champs Elysées, and he dined uncommonly well at his own table, seated above a waxed floor which it was Mrs Luce's happiness to believe had a finer polish than any other in the French capital. Occasionally he dined with a friend or two at the Café Anglais,* where his talent for ordering a dinner was a source of felicity to his companions and an object of admiration even to the head-waiter of the establishment. These were his only known pastimes, but they had beguiled his hours for upwards of half a century, and they doubtless justified his frequent declaration that there was no place like Paris. In no other place, on these terms, could Mr Luce flatter himself that he was enjoying life. There was nothing like Paris, but it must be confessed that Mr Luce thought less highly of this scene of his dissipations than in earlier days. In the list of his resources his political reflections should not be omitted, for they were doubtless the animating principle of many hours that superficially seemed vacant. Like many of his fellow colonists Mr Luce was a high—or rather a deep—conservative, and gave no countenance to the government lately established in France. He had no faith in its duration and would assure you from year to year that its end was close at hand. 'They want to be kept down, sir, to be kept down; nothing but the strong hand—the iron heel—will do for them,' he would frequently say of the French people; and his ideal of a fine showy clever rule was that of the superseded Empire.* 'Paris is much less attractive than in the days of the Emperor; *he* knew how to make a city pleasant,' Mr Luce had often remarked to Mrs Touchett, who was quite of his own way of thinking

and wished to know what one had crossed that odious Atlantic for but to get away from republics.

'Why, madam, sitting in the Champs Elysées, opposite to the Palace of Industry, I've seen the court-carriages from the Tuileries pass up and down as many as seven times a day. I remember one occasion when they went as high as nine. What do you see now? It's no use talking, the style's all gone. Napoleon knew what the French people want, and there'll be a dark cloud over Paris, our Paris, till they get the Empire back again.'

Among Mrs Luce's visitors on Sunday afternoons was a young man with whom Isabel had had a good deal of conversation and whom she found full of valuable knowledge. Mr Edward Rosier-Ned Rosier as he was called—was native to New York and had been brought up in Paris, living there under the eye of his father who, as it happened, had been an early and intimate friend of the late Mr Archer. Edward Rosier remembered Isabel as a little girl; it had been his father who came to the rescue of the small Archers at the inn at Neufchâtel (he was travelling that way with the boy and had stopped at the hotel by chance), after their *bonne* had gone off with the Russian prince and when Mr Archer's whereabouts remained for some days a mystery. Isabel remembered perfectly the neat little male child whose hair smelt of a delicious cosmetic and who had a *bonne* all his own, warranted to lose sight of him under no provocation. Isabel took a walk with the pair beside the lake and thought little Edward as pretty as an angel—a comparison by no means conventional in her mind, for she had a very definite conception of a type of features which she supposed to be angelic and which her new friend perfectly illustrated. A small pink face surmounted by a blue velvet bonnet and set off by a stiff embroidered collar had become the countenance of her childish dreams; and she had firmly believed for some time afterwards that the heavenly hosts conversed among themselves in a queer little dialect of French-English, expressing the properest sentiments, as when Edward told her that he was 'defended'* by his *bonne* to go near the edge of the lake, and that one must always obey to one's *bonne*. Ned Rosier's English had improved; at least it exhibited in a less degree the French variation. His father was dead and his *bonne* dismissed, but the young man still conformed to the spirit of their teaching—he never went to the edge of the lake. There was still something agreeable to the nostrils about him and something not offensive to nobler organs. He was a very gentle and gracious youth, with what are called cultivated tastes—an acquaintance with old china,* with good wine, with the bindings of books, with the *Almanach de Gotha*,* with the best shops, the best hotels, the hours of railway-trains. He could order a dinner almost as well as Mr Luce, and it was probable that as his experience accumulated he would be a worthy successor to that gentleman, whose rather grim politics he also advocated in a soft and innocent voice. He had some charming rooms in Paris, decorated with old Spanish altar-lace, the envy of his female friends, who declared that his chimney-piece was better draped than the high shoulders of many a duchess. He usually, however, spent a part of every winter at Pau, and had once passed a couple of months in the United States.

He took a great interest in Isabel and remembered perfectly the walk at Neufchâtel, when she would persist in going so near the edge. He seemed to recognise this same tendency in the subversive enquiry that I quoted a moment ago, and set himself to answer our heroine's question with greater urbanity than it perhaps deserved. 'What does it lead to, Miss Archer? Why Paris leads everywhere. You can't go anywhere unless you come here first. Every one that comes to Europe has got to pass through. You don't mean it in that sense so much? You mean what good it does you? Well, how can you penetrate futurity? How can you tell what lies ahead? If it's a pleasant road I don't care where it leads. I like the road, Miss Archer; I like the dear old asphalte. You can't get tired of it—you can't if you try. You think you would, but you wouldn't; there's always something new and fresh. Take the Hôtel Drouot,* now; they sometimes have three and four sales a week. Where can you get such things as you can here? In spite of all they say I maintain they're cheaper too, if you know the right places. I know plenty of places, but I keep them to myself. I'll tell you, if you like, as a particular favour; only you mustn't tell any one else. Don't you go anywhere without asking me first; I want you to promise me that. As a general thing avoid the Boulevards; there's very little to be done on the Boulevards. Speaking conscientiously—*sans blague**—I don't believe any one knows Paris better than I. You and Mrs Touchett must come and breakfast with me some day, and I'll show you my things; *je ne vous dis que ça!** There has been a great deal of talk about London of late; it's the fashion to cry up London. But there's nothing in it—you can't do anything in London. No Louis Quinze—nothing of the First Empire; nothing but their eternal Queen Anne.* It's good for one's bed-room, Queen Anne—for one's washing-room; but it isn't proper for a *salon*.* Do I spend my life at the auctioneer's?' Mr Rosier pursued in answer to another question of Isabel's. 'Oh no; I haven't the means. I wish I had. You think I'm a mere trifler; I can tell by the expression of your face—you've got a wonderfully expressive face. I hope you don't mind my saying that; I mean it as a kind of warning. You think I ought to do something, and so do I, so long as you leave it vague. But when you come to the point you see you have to stop. I can't go home and be a shopkeeper. You think I'm very well fitted? Ah, Miss

Archer, you overrate me. I can buy very well, but I can't sell; you should see when I sometimes try to get rid of my things. It takes much more ability to make other people buy than to buy yourself. When I think how clever they must be, the people who make *me* buy! Ah no; I couldn't be a shopkeeper. I can't be a doctor; it's a repulsive business. I can't be a clergyman; I haven't got convictions. And then I can't pronounce the names right in the Bible. They're very difficult, in the Old Testament particularly. I can't be a lawyer; I don't understand—how do you call it?—the American *procédure*.* Is there anything else? There's nothing for a gentleman in America. I should like to be a diplomatist; but American diplomacy—that's not for gentlemen either. I'm sure if you had seen the last min———'

Henrietta Stackpole, who was often with her friend when Mr Rosier, coming to pay his compliments late in the afternoon, expressed himself after the fashion I have sketched, usually interrupted the young man at this point and read him a lecture on the duties of the American citizen. She thought him most unnatural; he was worse than poor Ralph Touchett. Henrietta, however, was at this time more than ever addicted to fine criticism, for her conscience had been freshly alarmed as regards Isabel. She had not congratulated this young lady on her augmentations and begged to be excused from doing so.

'If Mr Touchett had consulted me about leaving you the money,' she frankly asserted, 'I'd have said to him "Never!"'

'I see,' Isabel had answered. 'You think it will prove a curse in disguise. Perhaps it will.'

'Leave it to some one you care less for—that's what I should have said.'

'To yourself for instance?' Isabel suggested jocosely. And then, 'Do you really believe it will ruin me?' she asked in quite another tone.

'I hope it won't ruin you; but it will certainly confirm your dangerous tendencies.'

'Do you mean the love of luxury—of extravagance?'

'No, no,' said Henrietta; 'I mean your exposure on the moral side. I approve of luxury; I think we ought to be as elegant as possible. Look at the luxury of our western cities; I've seen nothing over here to compare with it. I hope you'll never become grossly sensual; but I'm not afraid of that. The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams. You're not enough in contact with reality—with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you. You're too fastidious; you've too many graceful illusions. Your newly-acquired thousands will shut you up more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people who will be interested in keeping them up.'

Isabel's eyes expanded as she gazed at this lurid scene. 'What are my illusions?' she asked. 'I try so hard not to have any.'

'Well,' said Henrietta, 'you think you can lead a romantic life, that you can live by pleasing yourself and pleasing others. You'll find you're mistaken. Whatever life you lead you must put your soul in it—to make any sort of success of it; and from the moment you do that it ceases to be romance, I assure you: it becomes grim reality! And you can't always please yourself; you must sometimes please other people. That, I admit, you're very ready to do; but there's another thing that's still more important—you must often *dis*please others. You must always be ready for that—you must never shrink from it. That doesn't suit you at all—you're too fond of admiration, you like to be thought well of. You think we can escape disagreeable duties by taking romantic views—that's your great illusion, my dear. But we can't. You must be prepared on many occasions in life to please no one at all—not even yourself.'

Isabel shook her head sadly; she looked troubled and frightened. 'This, for you, Henrietta,' she said, 'must be one of those occasions!'

It was certainly true that Miss Stackpole, during her visit to Paris, which had been professionally more remunerative than her English sojourn, had not been living in the world of dreams. Mr Bantling, who had now returned to England, was her companion for the first four weeks of her stay; and about Mr Bantling there was nothing dreamy. Isabel learned from her friend that the two had led a life of great personal intimacy and that this had been a peculiar advantage to Henrietta, owing to the gentleman's remarkable knowledge of Paris. He had explained everything, shown her everything, been her constant guide and interpreter. They had breakfasted together, dined together, gone to the theatre together, supped together, really in a manner quite lived together. He was a true friend, Henrietta more than once assured our heroine; and she had never supposed that she could like any Englishman so well. Isabel could not have told you why, but she found something that ministered to mirth in the alliance the correspondent of the *Interviewer* had struck with Lady Pensil's brother; her amusement moreover subsisted in face of the fact that she thought it a credit to each of them. Isabel couldn't rid herself of a suspicion that they were playing somehow at crosspurposes—that the simplicity of each had been entrapped. But this simplicity was on either side none the less honourable. It was as graceful on Henrietta's part to believe that Mr

Bantling took an interest in the diffusion of lively journalism and in consolidating the position of lady-correspondents as it was on the part of his companion to suppose that the cause of the *Interviewer*—a periodical of which he never formed a very definite conception—was, if subtly analysed (a task to which Mr Bantling felt himself quite equal), but the cause of Miss Stackpole's need of demonstrative affection. Each of these groping celibates* supplied at any rate a want of which the other was impatiently conscious. Mr Bantling, who was of rather a slow and a discursive habit, relished a prompt, keen, positive woman, who charmed him by the influence of a shining, challenging eye and a kind of bandbox freshness, and who kindled a perception of raciness in a mind to which the usual fare of life seemed unsalted. Henrietta, on the other hand, enjoyed the society of a gentleman who appeared somehow, in his way, made, by expensive, roundabout, almost 'quaint' processes, for her use, and whose leisured state, though generally indefensible, was a decided boon to a breathless mate, and who was furnished with an easy, traditional, though by no means exhaustive, answer to almost any social or practical question that could come up. She often found Mr Bantling's answers very convenient, and in the press of catching the American post would largely and showily address them to publicity. It was to be feared that she was indeed drifting toward those abysses of sophistication as to which Isabel, wishing for a good-humoured retort, had warned her. There might be danger in store for Isabel; but it was scarcely to be hoped that Miss Stackpole, on her side, would find permanent rest in any adoption of the views of a class pledged to all the old abuses. Isabel continued to warn her good-humouredly; Lady Pensil's obliging brother was sometimes, on our heroine's lips, an object of irreverent and facetious allusion. Nothing, however, could exceed Henrietta's amiability on this point; she used to abound in the sense of Isabel's irony and to enumerate with elation the hours she had spent with this perfect man of the world—a term that had ceased to make with her, as previously, for opprobrium. Then, a few moments later, she would forget that they had been talking jocosely and would mention with impulsive earnestness some expedition she had enjoyed in his company. She would say: 'Oh, I know all about Versailles; I went there with Mr Bantling. I was bound to see it thoroughly—I warned him when we went out there that I was thorough: so we spent three days at the hotel and wandered all over the place. It was lovely weather—a kind of Indian summer, only not so good. We just lived in that park. Oh yes; you can't tell me anything about Versailles.' Henrietta appeared to have made arrangements to meet her gallant friend during the spring in Italy.

XXI

MRS TOUCHETT, before arriving in Paris, had fixed the day for her departure and by the middle of February had begun to travel southward. She interrupted her journey to pay a visit to her son, who at San Remo, on the Italian shore of the Mediterranean, had been spending a dull, bright winter beneath a slow-moving white umbrella. Isabel went with her aunt as a matter of course, though Mrs Touchett, with homely, customary logic, had laid before her a pair of alternatives.

'Now, of course, you're completely your own mistress and are as free as the bird on the bough. I don't mean you were not so before, but you're at present on a different footing—property erects a kind of barrier. You can do a great many things if you're rich which would be severely criticised if you were poor. You can go and come, you can travel alone, you can have your own establishment: I mean of course if you'll take a companion—some decayed gentlewoman, with a darned cashmere and dyed hair, who paints on velvet. You don't think you'd like that? Of course you can do as you please; I only want you to understand how much you're at liberty. You might take Miss Stackpole as your *dame de compagnie*;* she'd keep people off very well. I think, however, that it's a great deal better you should remain with me, in spite of there being no obligation. It's better for several reasons, quite apart from your liking it. I shouldn't think you'd like it, but I recommend you to make the sacrifice. Of course whatever novelty there may have been at first in my society has quite passed away, and you see me as I am—a dull, obstinate, narrow-minded old woman.'

'I don't think you're at all dull,' Isabel had replied to this.

'But you do think I'm obstinate and narrow-minded? I told you so!' said Mrs Touchett with much elation at being justified.

Isabel remained for the present with her aunt, because, in spite of eccentric impulses, she had a great regard for what was usually deemed decent, and a young gentlewoman without visible relations had always struck her as a flower without foliage. It was true that Mrs Touchett's conversation had never again appeared so brilliant as that first afternoon in Albany, when she sat in her damp waterproof and sketched the opportunities that Europe would offer to a young person of taste. This, however, was in a great measure the girl's own fault; she had got a glimpse of her aunt's experience, and her imagination constantly anticipated the judgements and emotions of a woman who had very little of the same faculty. Apart from this, Mrs Touchett had a great merit; she was as honest as a pair of compasses. There was a comfort in her stiffness and firmness; you knew exactly where to find her and were never liable to chance encounters and concussions. On her own ground she was perfectly present, but was never over-inquisitive as regards the territory of her neighbour. Isabel came at last to have a kind of undemonstrable pity for her; there seemed something so dreary in the condition of a person whose nature had, as it were, so little surface—offered so limited a face to the accretions of human contact. Nothing tender, nothing sympathetic, had ever had a chance to fasten upon it—no windsown blossom, no familiar softening moss. Her offered, her passive extent, in other words, was about that of a knife-edge. Isabel had reason to believe none the less that as she advanced in life she made more of those concessions to the sense of something obscurely distinct from convenience—more of them than she independently exacted. She was learning to sacrifice consistency to considerations of that inferior order for which the excuse must be found in the particular case. It was not to the credit of her absolute rectitude that she should have gone the longest way round to Florence in order to spend a few weeks with her invalid son; since in former years it had been one of her most definite convictions that when Ralph wished to see her he was at liberty to remember that Palazzo Crescentini contained a large apartment known as the quarter of the signorino.*

'I want to ask you something,' Isabel said to this young man the day after her arrival at San Remo—'something I've thought more than once of asking you by letter, but that I've hesitated on the whole to write about. Face to face, nevertheless, my question seems easy enough. Did you know your father intended to leave me so much money?'

Ralph stretched his legs a little further than usual and gazed a little more fixedly at the Mediterranean. 'What does it matter, my dear Isabel, whether I knew? My father was very obstinate.'

'So,' said the girl, 'you did know.'

'Yes; he told me. We even talked it over a little.'

‘What did he do it for?’ asked Isabel abruptly.

‘Why, as a kind of compliment.’

‘A compliment on what?’

‘On your so beautifully existing.’

‘He liked me too much,’ she presently declared.

‘That’s a way we all have.’

‘If I believed that I should be very unhappy. Fortunately I don’t believe it. I want to be treated with justice; I want nothing but that.’

‘Very good. But you must remember that justice to a lovely being is after all a florid sort of sentiment.’

‘I’m not a lovely being. How can you say that, at the very moment when I’m asking such odious questions? I must seem to you delicate!’

‘You seem to me troubled,’ said Ralph.

‘I am troubled.’

‘About what?’

For a moment she answered nothing; then she broke out: ‘Do you think it good for me suddenly to be made so rich? Henrietta doesn’t.’

‘Oh, hang Henrietta!’ said Ralph coarsely. ‘If you ask me I’m delighted at it.’

‘Is that why your father did it—for your amusement?’

‘I differ with Miss Stackpole,’ Ralph went on more gravely. ‘I think it very good for you to have means.’

Isabel looked at him with serious eyes. ‘I wonder whether you know what’s good for me—or whether you care.’

‘If I know depend upon it I care. Shall I tell you what it is? Not to torment yourself.’

‘Not to torment you, I suppose you mean.’

‘You can’t do that; I’m proof. Take things more easily. Don’t ask yourself so much whether this or that is good for you. Don’t question your conscience so much—it will get out of tune like a strummed piano. Keep it for great occasions. Don’t try so much to form your character—it’s like trying to pull open a tight, tender young rose. Live as you like best, and your character will take care of itself. Most things are good for you; the exceptions are very rare, and a comfortable income’s not one of them.’ Ralph paused, smiling; Isabel had listened quickly. ‘You’ve too much power of thought-above all too much conscience,’ Ralph added. ‘It’s out of all reason, the number of things you think wrong. Put back your watch. Diet your fever. Spread your wings; rise above the ground. It’s never wrong to do that.’*

She had listened eagerly, as I say; and it was her nature to understand quickly. ‘I wonder if you appreciate what you say. If you do, you take a great responsibility.’

‘You frighten me a little, but I think I’m right,’ said Ralph, persisting in cheer.

‘All the same what you say is very true,’ Isabel pursued. ‘You could say nothing more true. I’m absorbed in myself—I look at life too much as a doctor’s prescription. Why indeed should we perpetually be thinking whether things are good for us, as if we were patients lying in a hospital? Why should I be so afraid of not doing right? As if it mattered to the world whether I do right or wrong!’

‘You’re a capital person to advise,’ said Ralph; ‘you take the wind out of *my* sails!’

She looked at him as if she had not heard him—though she was following out the train of reflexion which he himself had kindled. ‘I try to care more about the world than about myself—but I always come back to myself. It’s because I’m afraid.’ She stopped; her voice had trembled a little. ‘Yes, I’m afraid; I can’t tell you. A large fortune means freedom, and I’m afraid of that. It’s such a fine thing, and one should make such a good use of it. If one shouldn’t one would be ashamed. And one must keep thinking; it’s a constant effort. I’m not sure it’s not a greater happiness to be powerless.’

‘For weak people I’ve no doubt it’s a greater happiness. For weak people the effort not to be contemptible must be great.’

‘And how do you know I’m not weak?’ Isabel asked.

‘Ah,’ Ralph answered with a flush that the girl noticed, ‘if you are I’m awfully sold!’

The charm of the Mediterranean coast only deepened for our heroine on acquaintance, for it was the threshold of Italy, the gate of admirations. Italy, as yet imperfectly seen and felt, stretched before her as a land of promise, a land in which a love of the beautiful might be comforted by endless knowledge. Whenever she strolled upon the shore with her cousin—and she was the companion of his daily walk—

she looked across the sea, with longing eyes, to where she knew that Genoa lay. She was glad to pause, however, on the edge of this larger adventure; there was such a thrill even in the preliminary hovering. It affected her moreover as a peaceful interlude, as a hush of the drum and fife in a career which she had little warrant as yet for regarding as agitated, but which nevertheless she was constantly picturing to herself by the light of her hopes, her fears, her fancies, her ambitions, her predilections, and which reflected these subjective accidents in a manner sufficiently dramatic. Madame Merle had predicted to Mrs Touchett that after their young friend had put her hand into her pocket half a dozen times she would be reconciled to the idea that it had been filled by a munificent uncle; and the event justified, as it had so often justified before, that lady's perspicacity. Ralph Touchett had praised his cousin for being morally inflammable, that is for being quick to take a hint that was meant as good advice. His advice had perhaps helped the matter; she had at any rate before leaving San Remo grown used to feeling rich. The consciousness in question found a proper place in rather a dense little group of ideas that she had about herself, and often it was by no means the least agreeable. It took perpetually for granted a thousand good intentions. She lost herself in a maze of visions; the fine things to be done by a rich, independent, generous girl who took a large human view of occasions and obligations were sublime in the mass. Her fortune therefore became to her mind a part of her better self; it gave her importance, gave her even, to her own imagination, a certain ideal beauty. What it did for her in the imagination of others is another affair, and on this point we must also touch in time. The visions I have just spoken of were mixed with other debates. Isabel liked better to think of the future than of the past; but at times, as she listened to the murmur of the Mediterranean waves, her glance took a backward flight. It rested upon two figures which, in spite of increasing distance, were still sufficiently salient; they were recognisable without difficulty as those of Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton. It was strange how quickly these images of energy had fallen into the background of our young lady's life. It was in her disposition at all times to lose faith in the reality of absent things; she could summon back her faith, in case of need, with an effort, but the effort was often painful even when the reality had been pleasant. The past was apt to look dead and its revival rather to show the livid light of a judgement-day. The girl moreover was not prone to take for granted that she herself lived in the mind of others—she had not the fatuity to believe she left indelible traces. She was capable of being wounded by the discovery that she had been forgotten; but of all liberties the one she herself found sweetest was the liberty to forget. She had not given her last shilling, sentimentally speaking, either to Caspar Goodwood or to Lord Warburton, and yet couldn't but feel them appreciably in debt to her. She had of course reminded herself that she was to hear from Mr Goodwood again; but this was not to be for another year and a half, and in that time a great many things might happen. She had indeed failed to say to herself that her American suitor might find some other girl more comfortable to woo; because, though it was certain many other girls would prove so, she had not the smallest belief that this merit would attract him. But she reflected that she herself might know the humiliation of change, might really, for that matter, come to the end of the things that were not Caspar (even though there appeared so many of them), and find rest in those very elements of his presence which struck her now as impediments to the finer respiration. It was conceivable that these impediments should some day prove a sort of blessing in disguise—a clear and quiet harbour enclosed by a brave granite breakwater. But that day could only come in its order, and she couldn't wait for it with folded hands. That Lord Warburton should continue to cherish her image seemed to her more than a noble humility or an enlightened pride ought to wish to reckon with. She had so definitely undertaken to preserve no record of what had passed between them that a corresponding effort on his own part would be eminently just. This was not, as it may seem, merely a theory tinged with sarcasm. Isabel candidly believed that his lordship would, in the usual phrase, get over his disappointment. He had been deeply affected—this she believed, and she was still capable of deriving pleasure from the belief; but it was absurd that a man both so intelligent and so honourably dealt with should cultivate a scar out of proportion to any wound. Englishmen liked moreover to be comfortable, said Isabel, and there could be little comfort for Lord Warburton, in the long run, in brooding over a self-sufficient American girl who had been but a casual acquaintance. She flattered herself that, should she hear from one day to another that he had married some young woman of his own country who had done more to deserve him, she should receive the news without a pang even of surprise. It would have proved that he believed she was firm—which was what she wished to seem to him. That alone was grateful to her pride.

XXII

ON one of the first days of May, some six months after old Mr Touchett's death, a small group that might have been described by a painter as composing well was gathered in one of the many rooms of an ancient villa crowning an olive-muffled hill outside of the Roman gate of Florence. The villa was a long, rather blank-looking structure, with the far-projecting roof which Tuscany loves and which, on the hills that encircle Florence, when considered from a distance, make so harmonious a rectangle with the straight, dark, definite cypresses that usually rise in groups of three or four beside it. The house had a front upon a little grassy, empty, rural piazza which occupied a part of the hill-top; and this front, pierced with a few windows in irregular relations and furnished with a stone bench lengthily adjusted to the base of the structure and useful as a lounging-place to one or two persons wearing more or less of that air of undervalued merit which in Italy, for some reason or other, always gracefully invests any one who confidently assumes a perfectly passive attitude—this antique, solid, weather-worn, yet imposing front had a somewhat incommunicative character. It was the mask, not the face of the house. It had heavy lids, but no eyes; the house in reality looked another way—looked off behind, into splendid openness and the range of the afternoon light. In that quarter the villa overhung the slope of its hill and the long valley of the Arno, hazy with Italian colour. It had a narrow garden, in the manner of a terrace, productive chiefly of tangles of wild roses and other old stone benches, mossy and sun-warmed. The parapet of the terrace was just the height to lean upon, and beneath it the ground declined into the vagueness of olive-crops and vineyards. It is not, however, with the outside of the place that we are concerned; on this bright morning of ripened spring its tenants had reason to prefer the shady side of the wall. The windows of the ground-floor, as you saw them from the piazza, were, in their noble proportions, extremely architectural; but their function seemed less to offer communication with the world than to defy the world to look in. They were massively crossbarred, and placed at such a height that curiosity, even on tiptoe, expired before it reached them. In an apartment lighted by a row of three of these jealous apertures—one of the several distinct apartments into which the villa was divided and which were mainly occupied by foreigners of random race long resident in Florence—a gentleman was seated in company with a young girl and two good sisters from a religious house. The room was, however, less sombre than our indications may have represented, for it had a wide, high door, which now stood open into the tangled garden behind; and the tall iron lattices admitted on occasion more than enough of the Italian sunshine. It was moreover a seat of ease, indeed of luxury, telling of arrangements subtly studied and refinements frankly proclaimed, and containing a variety of those faded hangings of damask and tapestry, those chests and cabinets of carved and time-polished oak, those angular specimens of pictorial art in frames as pedantically primitive, those perverse looking relics of mediæval brass and pottery, of which Italy has long been the not quite exhausted storehouse. These things kept terms with articles of modern furniture in which large allowance had been made for a lounging generation; it was to be noticed that all the chairs were deep and well padded and that much space was occupied by a writing-table of which the ingenious perfection bore the stamp of London and the nineteenth century. There were books in profusion and magazines and newspapers, and a few small, odd, elaborate pictures, chiefly in water-colour. One of these productions stood on a drawing-room easel before which, at the moment we begin to be concerned with her, the young girl I have mentioned had placed herself. She was looking at the picture in silence.

Silence—absolute silence—had not fallen upon her companions; but their talk had an appearance of embarrassed continuity. The two good sisters had not settled themselves in their respective chairs; their attitude expressed a final reserve and their faces showed the glaze of prudence. They were plain, ample, mild-featured women, with a kind of business-like modesty to which the impersonal aspect of their stiffened linen and of the serge that draped them as if nailed on frames gave an advantage. One of them, a person of a certain age, in spectacles, with a fresh complexion and a full cheek, had a more discriminating manner than her colleague, as well as the responsibility of their errand, which apparently related to the young girl. This object of interest wore her hat—an ornament of extreme simplicity and not at variance with her plain muslin gown, too short for her years, though it must already have been 'let out'. The gentleman who might have been supposed to be entertaining the two nuns was perhaps conscious of the difficulties of his function, it being in its way as arduous to converse with the very meek as with the very mighty. At the same time he was clearly much occupied with their quiet charge, and

while she turned her back to him his eyes rested gravely on her slim, small figure. He was a man of forty, with a high but well-shaped head, on which the hair, still dense, but prematurely grizzled, had been cropped close. He had a fine, narrow, extremely modelled and composed face, of which the only fault was just this effect of its running a trifle too much to points; an appearance to which the shape of the beard contributed not a little. This beard, cut in the manner of the portraits of the sixteenth century and surmounted by a fair moustache, of which the ends had a romantic upward flourish, gave its wearer a foreign, traditionary look and suggested that he was a gentleman who studied style. His conscious, curious eyes, however, eyes at once vague and penetrating, intelligent and hard, expressive of the observer as well as of the dreamer, would have assured you that he studied it only within well-chosen limits, and that in so far as he sought it he found it. You would have been much at a loss to determine his original clime and country; he had none of the superficial signs that usually render the answer to this question an insipidly easy one. If he had English blood in his veins it had probably received some French or Italian commixture; but he suggested, fine gold coin as he was, no stamp nor emblem of the common mintage that provides for general circulation; he was the elegant complicated medal struck off for a special occasion.* He had a light, lean, rather languid-looking figure, and was apparently neither tall nor short. He was dressed as a man dresses who takes little other trouble about it than to have no vulgar things.

'Well, my dear, what do you think of it?' he asked the young girl. He used the Italian tongue, and used it with perfect ease; but this would not have convinced you he was Italian.

The child turned her head earnestly to one side and the other. 'It's very pretty, papa. Did you make it yourself?'

'Certainly I made it. Don't you think I'm clever?'

'Yes, papa, very clever; I also have learned to make pictures.' And she turned round and showed a small, fair face painted with a fixed and intensely sweet smile.

'You should have brought me a specimen of your powers.'

'I've brought a great many; they're in my trunk.'

'She draws very—very carefully,' the elder of the nuns remarked, speaking in French.

'I'm glad to hear it. Is it you who have instructed her?'

'Happily no,' said the good sister, blushing a little. '*Ce n'est pas ma partie*.* I teach nothing; I leave that to those who are wiser. We've an excellent drawing-master, Mr—Mr—what is his name?' she asked of her companion.

Her companion looked about at the carpet. 'It's a German name,' she said in Italian, as if it needed to be translated.

'Yes,' the other went on. 'he's a German, and we've had him many years.'

The young girl, who was not heeding the conversation, had wandered away to the open door of the large room and stood looking into the garden. 'And you, my sister, are French,' said the gentleman.

'Yes, sir,' the visitor gently replied. 'I speak to the pupils in my own tongue. I know no other. But we have sisters of other countries—English, German, Irish. They all speak their proper language.'

The gentleman gave a smile. 'Has my daughter been under the care of one of the Irish ladies?' And then, as he saw that his visitors suspected a joke, though failing to understand it, 'You're very complete,' he instantly added.

'Oh, yes, we're complete. We've everything, and everything's of the best.'

'We have gymnastics,' the Italian sister ventured to remark. 'But not dangerous.'

'I hope not. Is that *your* branch?' A question which provoked much candid hilarity on the part of the two ladies; on the subsidence of which their entertainer, glancing at his daughter, remarked that she had grown.

'Yes, but I think she has finished. She'll remain—not big,' said the French sister.

'I'm not sorry. I prefer women like books—very good and not too long. But I know,' the gentleman said, 'no particular reason why my child should be short.'

The nun gave a temperate shrug, as if to intimate that such things might be beyond our knowledge. 'She's in very good health; that's the best thing.'

'Yes, she looks sound.' And the young girl's father watched her a moment. 'What do you see in the garden?' he asked in French.

'I see many flowers,' she replied in a sweet, small voice and with an accent as good as his own.

‘Yes, but not many good ones. However, such as they are, go out and gather some for *ces dames*.’*

The child turned to him with her smile heightened by pleasure. ‘May I truly?’

‘Ah, when I tell you,’ said her father.

The girl glanced at the elder of the nuns. ‘May I, truly, *ma mère*?’*

‘Obey monsieur your father, my child,’ said the sister, blushing again.

The child, satisfied with this authorisation, descended from the threshold and was presently lost to sight. ‘You don’t spoil them,’ said her father gaily.

‘For everything they must ask leave. That’s our system. Leave is freely granted, but they must ask it.’

‘Oh, I don’t quarrel with your system; I’ve no doubt it’s excellent. I sent you my daughter to see what you’d make of her. I had faith.’

‘One must have faith,’ the sister blandly rejoined, gazing through her spectacles.

‘Well, has my faith been rewarded? What have you made of her?’

The sister dropped her eyes a moment. ‘A good Christian, monsieur.’

Her host dropped his eyes as well; but it was probable that the movement had in each case a different spring. ‘Yes, and what else?’

He watched the lady from the convent, probably thinking she would say that a good Christian was everything; but for all her simplicity she was not so crude as that. ‘A charming young lady—a real little woman—a daughter in whom you will have nothing but contentment.’

‘She seems to me very *gentille*,’* said the father. ‘She’s really pretty.’

‘She’s perfect. She has no faults.’

‘She never had any as a child, and I’m glad you have given her none.’

‘We love her too much,’ said the spectacled sister with dignity. ‘And as for faults, how can we give what we have not? *Le couvent n’est pas comme le monde, monsieur*.* She’s our daughter, as you may say. We’ve had her since she was so small.’

‘Of all those we shall lose this year she’s the one we shall miss most,’ the younger woman murmured deferentially.

‘Ah, yes, we shall talk long of her,’ said the other. ‘We shall hold her up to the new ones.’ And at this the good sister appeared to find her spectacles dim; while her companion, after fumbling a moment, presently drew forth a pocket-handkerchief of durable texture.

‘It’s not certain you’ll lose her; nothing’s settled yet,’ their host rejoined quickly; not as if to anticipate their tears, but in the tone of a man saying what was most agreeable to himself.

‘We should be very happy to believe that. Fifteen is very young to leave us.’

‘Oh,’ exclaimed the gentleman with more vivacity than he had yet used, ‘it is not I who wish to take her away. I wish you could keep her always!’

‘Ah, monsieur,’ said the elder sister, smiling and getting up, ‘good as she is, she’s made for the world. *Le monde y gagnera*.’*

‘If all the good people were hidden away in convents how would the world get on?’ her companion softly enquired, rising also.

This was a question of a wider bearing than the good woman apparently supposed; and the lady in spectacles took a harmonising view by saying comfortably: ‘Fortunately there are good people everywhere.’

‘If you’re going there will be two less here,’ her host remarked gallantly.

For this extravagant sally his simple visitors had no answer, and they simply looked at each other in decent deprecation; but their confusion was speedily covered by the return of the young girl with two large bunches of roses—one of them all white, the other red.

‘I give you your choice, mamman Catherine,’ said the child. ‘It’s only the colour that’s different, mamman Justine; there are just as many roses in one bunch as in the other.’

The two sisters turned to each other, smiling and hesitating, with ‘Which will you take?’ and ‘No, it’s for you to choose.’

‘I’ll take the red, thank you,’ said mother Catherine in the spectacles. ‘I’m so red myself. They’ll comfort us on our way back to Rome.’

‘Ah, they won’t last,’ cried the young girl. ‘I wish I could give you something that would last!’

‘You’ve given us a good memory of yourself, my daughter. That will last!’

‘I wish nuns could wear pretty things. I would give you my blue beads,’ the child went on.

‘And do you go back to Rome to-night?’ her father enquired.

‘Yes, we take the train again. We’ve so much to do *là–bas*.’*

‘Are you not tired?’

‘We are never tired.’

‘Ah, my sister, sometimes,’ murmured the junior votaress.

‘Not to-day, at any rate. We have rested too well here. *Que Dieu vous garde, ma fille*.’*

Their host, while they exchanged kisses with his daughter, went forward to open the door through which they were to pass; but as he did so he gave a slight exclamation, and stood looking beyond. The door opened into a vaulted ante-chamber, as high as a chapel and paved with red tiles; and into this ante-chamber a lady had just been admitted by a servant, a lad in shabby livery, who was now ushering her toward the apartment in which our friends were grouped. The gentleman at the door, after dropping his exclamation, remained silent; in silence too the lady advanced. He gave her no further audible greeting and offered her no hand, but stood aside to let her pass into the saloon. At the threshold she hesitated. ‘Is there any one?’ she asked.

‘Some one you may see.’

She went in and found herself confronted with the two nuns and their pupil, who was coming forward, between them, with a hand in the arm of each. At the sight of the new visitor they all paused, and the lady, who had also stopped, stood looking at them. The young girl gave a little soft cry: ‘Ah, Madame Merle!’

The visitor had been slightly startled, but her manner the next instant was none the less gracious. ‘Yes, it’s Madame Merle, come to welcome you home.’ And she held out two hands to the girl, who immediately came up to her, presenting her forehead to be kissed. Madame Merle saluted this portion of her charming little person and then stood smiling at the two nuns. They acknowledged her smile with a decent obeisance, but permitted themselves no direct scrutiny of this imposing, brilliant woman, who seemed to bring in with her something of the radiance of the outer world.

‘These ladies have brought my daughter home, and now they return to the convent,’ the gentleman explained.

‘Ah, you go back to Rome? I’ve lately come from there. It’s very lovely now,’ said Madame Merle.

The good sisters, standing with their hands folded into their sleeves, accepted this statement uncritically; and the master of the house asked his new visitor how long it was since she had left Rome. ‘She came to see me at the convent,’ said the young girl before the lady addressed had time to reply.

‘I’ve been more than once, Pansy,’ Madame Merle declared. ‘Am I not your great friend in Rome?’

‘I remember the last time best,’ said Pansy, ‘because you told me I should come away.’

‘Did you tell her that?’ the child’s father asked.

‘I hardly remember. I told her what I thought would please her. I’ve been in Florence a week. I hoped you would come to see me.’

‘I should have done so if I had known you were there. One doesn’t know such things by inspiration—though I suppose one ought. You had better sit down.’

These two speeches were made in a particular tone of voice—a tone half-lowered and carefully quiet, but as from habit rather than from any definite need. Madame Merle looked about her, choosing her seat. ‘You’re going to the door with these women? Let me of course not interrupt the ceremony. *Je vous salue, mesdames*,’* she added, in French, to the nuns, as if to dismiss them.

‘This lady’s a great friend of ours; you will have seen her at the convent,’ said their entertainer. ‘We’ve much faith in her judgement, and she’ll help me to decide whether my daughter shall return to you at the end of the holidays.’

‘I hope you’ll decide in our favour, madame,’ the sister in spectacles ventured to remark.

‘That’s Mr Osmond’s pleasantry; I decide nothing,’ said Madame Merle, but also as in pleasantry. ‘I believe you’ve a very good school, but Miss Osmond’s friends must remember that she’s very naturally meant for the world.’

‘That’s what I’ve told monsieur,’ sister Catherine answered. ‘It’s precisely to fit her for the world,’ she murmured, glancing at Pansy, who stood, at a little distance, attentive to Madame Merle’s elegant apparel.

‘Do you hear that, Pansy? You’re very naturally meant for the world,’ said Pansy’s father.

The child fixed him an instant with her pure young eyes. ‘Am I not meant for you, papa?’

Papa gave a quick, light laugh. ‘That doesn’t prevent it! I’m of the world, Pansy.’

‘Kindly permit us to retire,’ said sister Catherine. ‘Be good and wise and happy in any case, my daughter.’

‘I shall certainly come back and see you,’ Pansy returned, recommencing her embraces, which were presently interrupted by Madame Merle.

‘Stay with me, dear child,’ she said, ‘while your father takes the good ladies to the door.’

Pansy stared, disappointed, yet not protesting. She was evidently impregnated with the idea of submission, which was due to any one who took the tone of authority; and she was a passive spectator of the operation of her fate. ‘May I not see mamman Catherine get into the carriage?’ she nevertheless asked very gently.

‘It would please me better if you’d remain with me,’ said Madame Merle, while Mr Osmond and his companions, who had bowed low again to the other visitor, passed into the ante-chamber.

‘Oh yes, I’ll stay,’ Pansy answered; and she stood near Madame Merle, surrendering her little hand, which this lady took. She stared out of the window; her eyes had filled with tears.

‘I’m glad they’ve taught you to obey,’ said Madame Merle. ‘That’s what good little girls should do.’

‘Oh yes, I obey very well,’ cried Pansy with soft eagerness, almost with boastfulness, as if she had been speaking of her piano-playing. And then she gave a faint, just audible sigh.

Madame Merle, holding her hand, drew it across her own fine palm and looked at it. The gaze was critical, but it found nothing to deprecate; the child’s small hand was delicate and fair. ‘I hope they always see that you wear gloves,’ she said in a moment. ‘Little girls usually dislike them.’

‘I used to dislike them, but I like them now,’ the child made answer.

‘Very good, I’ll make you a present of a dozen.’

‘I thank you very much. What colours will they be?’ Pansy demanded with interest.

Madame Merle meditated. ‘Useful colours.’

‘But very pretty?’

‘Are you very fond of pretty things?’

‘Yes; but—but not too fond,’ said Pansy with a trace of asceticism.

‘Well, they won’t be too pretty,’ Madame Merle returned with a laugh. She took the child’s other hand and drew her nearer; after which, looking at her a moment, ‘Shall you miss mother Catherine?’ she went on.

‘Yes—when I think of her.’

‘Try then not to think of her. Perhaps some day,’ added Madame Merle, ‘you’ll have another mother.’

‘I don’t think that’s necessary,’ Pansy said, repeating her little soft conciliatory sigh. ‘I had more than thirty mothers at the convent.’

Her father’s step sounded again in the ante-chamber, and Madame Merle got up, releasing the child. Mr Osmond came in and closed the door; then, without looking at Madame Merle, he pushed one or two chairs back into their places. His visitor waited a moment for him to speak, watching him as he moved about. Then at last she said: ‘I hoped you’d have come to Rome. I thought it possible you’d have wished yourself to fetch Pansy away.’

‘That was a natural supposition; but I’m afraid it’s not the first time I’ve acted in defiance of your calculations.’

‘Yes,’ said Madame Merle, ‘I think you very perverse.’

Mr Osmond busied himself for a moment in the room—there was plenty of space in it to move about—in the fashion of a man mechanically seeking pretexts for not giving an attention which may be embarrassing. Presently, however, he had exhausted his pretexts; there was nothing left for him—unless he took up a book—but to stand with his hands behind him looking at Pansy. ‘Why didn’t you come and see the last of mamman Catherine?’ he asked of her abruptly in French.

Pansy hesitated a moment, glancing at Madame Merle. ‘I asked her to stay with me,’ said this lady, who had seated herself again in another place.

‘Ah, that was better,’ Osmond conceded. With which he dropped into a chair and sat looking at Madame Merle; bent forward a little, his elbows on the edge of the arms and his hands interlocked.

‘She’s going to give me some gloves,’ said Pansy.

‘You needn’t tell that to every one, my dear,’ Madame Merle observed.

‘You’re very kind to her,’ said Osmond. ‘She’s supposed to have everything she needs.’

‘I should think she had had enough of the nuns.’

‘If we’re going to discuss that matter she had better go out of the room.’

‘Let her stay,’ said Madame Merle. ‘We’ll talk of something else.’

‘If you like I won’t listen,’ Pansy suggested with an appearance of candour which imposed conviction.

‘You may listen, charming child, because you won’t understand,’ her father replied. The child sat down, deferentially, near the open door, within sight of the garden, into which she directed her innocent, wistful eyes; and Mr Osmond went on irrelevantly, addressing himself to his other companion. ‘You’re looking particularly well.’

‘I think I always look the same,’ said Madame Merle.

‘You always are the same. You don’t vary. You’re a wonderful woman.’

‘Yes, I think I am.’

‘You sometimes change your mind, however. You told me on your return from England that you wouldn’t leave Rome again for the present.’

‘I’m pleased that you remember so well what I say. That was my intention. But I’ve come to Florence to meet some friends who have lately arrived and as to whose movements I was at that time uncertain.’

‘That reason’s characteristic. You’re always doing something for your friends.’

Madame Merle smiled straight at her host. ‘It’s less characteristic than your comment upon it—which is perfectly insincere. I don’t, however, make a crime of that,’ she added, ‘because if you don’t believe what you say there’s no reason why you should. I don’t ruin myself for my friends; I don’t deserve your praise. I care greatly for myself.’

‘Exactly; but yourself includes so many other selves—so much of every one else and of everything. I never knew a person whose life touched so many other lives.’

‘What do you call one’s life?’ asked Madame Merle. ‘One’s appearance, one’s movements, one’s engagements, one’s society?’

‘I call *your* life your ambitions,’ said Osmond.

Madame Merle looked a moment at Pansy. ‘I wonder if she understands that,’ she murmured.

‘You see she can’t stay with us!’ And Pansy’s father gave rather a joyless smile. ‘Go into the garden, *mignonne*,* and pluck a flower or two for Madame Merle,’ he went on in French.

‘That’s just what I wanted to do,’ Pansy exclaimed, rising with promptness and noiselessly departing. Her father followed her to the open door, stood a moment watching her, and then came back, but remained standing, or rather strolling to and from as if to cultivate a sense of freedom which in another attitude might be wanting.

‘My ambitions are principally for you,’ said Madame Merle, looking up at him with a certain courage.

‘That comes back to what I say. I’m part of your life—I and a thousand others. You’re not selfish—I can’t admit that. If you were selfish, what should I be? What epithet would properly describe me?’

‘You’re indolent. For me that’s your worst fault.’

‘I’m afraid it’s really my best.’

‘You don’t care,’ said Madame Merle gravely.

‘No; I don’t think I care much. What sort of a fault do you call that? My indolence, at any rate, was one of the reasons I didn’t go to Rome. But it was only one of them.’

‘It’s not of importance—to me at least—that you didn’t go; though I should have been glad to see you. I’m glad you’re not in Rome now—which you might be, would probably be, if you had gone there a month ago. There’s something I should like you to do at present in Florence.’

‘Please remember my indolence,’ said Osmond.

‘I do remember it; but I beg you to forget it. In that way you’ll have both the virtue and the reward. This is not a great labour, and it may prove a real interest. How long is it since you made a new acquaintance?’

‘I don’t think I’ve made any since I made yours.’

‘It’s time then you should make another. There’s a friend of mine I want you to know.’

Mr Osmond, in his walk, had gone back to the open door again and was looking at his daughter as she moved about in the intense sunshine. ‘What good will it do me?’ he asked with a sort of genial crudity.

Madame Merle waited. ‘It will amuse you.’ There was nothing crude in this rejoinder; it had been thoroughly well considered.

‘If you say that, you know, I believe it,’ said Osmond, coming toward her. ‘There are some points in which my confidence in you is complete. I’m perfectly aware, for instance, that you know good society from bad.’

‘Society is all bad.’

‘Pardon me. That isn’t—the knowledge I impute to you—a common sort of wisdom. You’ve gained it in the right way-experimentally; you’ve compared an immense number of more or less impossible people with each other.’

‘Well, I invite you to profit by my knowledge.’

‘To profit? Are you very sure that I shall?’

‘It’s what I hope. It will depend on yourself. If I could only induce you to make an effort!’

‘Ah, there you are! I knew something tiresome was coming. What in the world—that’s likely to turn up here—is worth an effort?’

Madame Merle flushed as with a wounded intention. ‘Don’t be foolish, Osmond. No one knows better than you what is worth an effort. Haven’t I seen you in old days?’

‘I recognise some things. But they’re none of them probable in this poor life.’

‘It’s the effort that makes them probable,’ said Madame Merle.

‘There’s something in that. Who then is your friend?’

‘The person I came to Florence to see. She’s a niece of Mrs Touchett, whom you’ll not have forgotten.’

‘A niece? The word niece suggests youth and ignorance. I see what you’re coming to.’

‘Yes, she’s young—twenty-three years old. She’s a great friend of mine. I met her for the first time in England, several months ago, and we struck up a grand alliance. I like her immensely, and I do what I don’t do every day—I admire her. You’ll do the same.’

‘Not if I can help it.’

‘Precisely. But you won’t be able to help it.’

‘Is she beautiful, clever, rich, splendid, universally intelligent and unprecedentedly virtuous? It’s only on those conditions that I care to make her acquaintance. You know I asked you some time ago never to speak to me of a creature who shouldn’t correspond to that description. I know plenty of dingy people; I don’t want to know any more.’

‘Miss Archer isn’t dingy; she’s as bright as the morning. She corresponds to your description; it’s for that I wish you to know her. She fills all your requirements.’

‘More or less, of course.’

‘No; quite literally. She’s beautiful, accomplished, generous and, for an American, well-born. She’s also very clever and very amiable, and she has a handsome fortune.’

Mr Osmond listened to this in silence, appearing to turn it over in his mind with his eyes on his informant. ‘What do you want to do with her?’ he asked at last.

‘What you see. Put her in your way.’

‘Isn’t she meant for something better than that?’

‘I don’t pretend to know what people are meant for,’ said Madame Merle. ‘I only know what I can do with them.’

‘I’m sorry for Miss Archer!’ Osmond declared.

Madame Merle got up. ‘If that’s a beginning of interest in her I take note of it.’

The two stood there face to face; she settled her mantilla, looking down at it as she did so. ‘You’re looking very well,’ Osmond repeated still less relevantly than before. ‘You have some idea. You’re never so well as when you’ve got an idea; they’re always becoming to you.’

In the manner and tone of these two persons, on first meeting at any juncture, and especially when they met in the presence of others, was something indirect and circumspect, as if they had approached each other obliquely and addressed each other by implication. The effect of each appeared to be to intensify to an appreciable degree the self-consciousness of the other. Madame Merle of course carried off any embarrassment better than her friend; but even Madame Merle had not on this occasion the form she would have liked to have—the perfect self-possession she would have wished to wear for her host. The point to be made is, however, that at a certain moment the element between them, whatever it was, always levelled itself and left them more closely face to face than either ever was with any one else. This

was what had happened now. They stood there knowing each other well and each on the whole willing to accept the satisfaction of knowing as a compensation for the inconvenience—whatever it might be—of being known. ‘I wish very much you were not so heartless,’ Madame Merle quietly said. ‘It has always been against you, and it will be against you now.’

‘I’m not so heartless as you think. Every now and then something touches me—as for instance your saying just now that your ambitions are for me. I don’t understand it; I don’t see how or why they should be. But it touches me, all the same.’

‘You’ll probably understand it even less as time goes on. There are some things you’ll never understand. There’s no particular need you should.’

‘You, after all, are the most remarkable of women,’ said Osmond. ‘You have more in you than almost any one. I don’t see why you think Mrs Touchett’s niece should matter very much to me, when-when——’ But he paused a moment.

‘When I myself have mattered so little?’

‘That of course is not what I meant to say. When I’ve known and appreciated such a woman as you.’

‘Isabel Archer’s better than I,’ said Madame Merle.

Her companion gave a laugh. ‘How little you must think of her to say that!’

‘Do you suppose I’m capable of jealousy? Please answer me that.’

‘With regard to me? No; on the whole I don’t.’

‘Come and see me then, two days hence. I’m staying at Mrs Touchett’s—Palazzo Crescentini—and the girl will be there.’

‘Why didn’t you ask me that at first simply, without speaking of the girl?’ said Osmond. ‘You could have had her there at any rate.’

Madame Merle looked at him in the manner of a woman whom no question he could ever put would find unprepared. ‘Do you wish to know why? Because I’ve spoken of you to her.’

Osmond frowned and turned away. ‘I’d rather not know that.’ Then in a moment he pointed out the easel supporting the little water-colour drawing.

‘Have you seen what’s there—my last?’

Madame Merle drew near and considered. ‘Is it the Venetian Alps—one of your last year’s sketches?’

‘Yes—but how you guess everything!’

She looked a moment longer, then turned away. ‘You know I don’t care for your drawings.’

‘I know it, yet I’m always surprised at it. They’re really so much better than most people’s.’

‘That may very well be. But as the only thing you do—well, it’s so little. I should have liked you to do so many other things: those were my ambitions.’

‘Yes; you’ve told me many times—things that were impossible.’

‘Things that were impossible,’ said Madame Merle. And then in quite a different tone: ‘In itself your little picture’s very good.’ She looked about the room—at the old cabinets, pictures, tapestries, surfaces of faded silk. ‘Your rooms at least are perfect. I’m struck with that afresh whenever I come back; I know none better anywhere. You understand this sort of thing as nobody anywhere does. You’ve such adorable taste.’

‘I’m sick of my adorable taste,’ said Gilbert Osmond.

‘You must nevertheless let Miss Archer come and see it. I’ve told her about it.’

‘I don’t object to showing my things—when people are not idiots.’

‘You do it delightfully. As cicerone* of your museum you appear to particular advantage.’

Mr Osmond, in return for this compliment, simply looked at once colder and more attentive. ‘Did you say she was rich?’

‘She has seventy thousand pounds.’

‘*En écus bien comptés*?’*

‘There’s no doubt whatever about her fortune. I’ve seen it, as I may say.’

‘Satisfactory woman!—I mean *you*. And if I go to see her shall I see the mother?’

‘The mother? She has none—nor father either.’

‘The aunt then—whom did you say?—Mrs Touchett.’

‘I can easily keep her out of the way.’

‘I don’t object to her,’ said Osmond; ‘I rather like Mrs Touchett. She has a sort of old-fashioned

character that's passing away—a vivid identity. But that long jackanapes the son—is he about the place?'

'He's there, but he won't trouble you.'

'He's a good deal of a donkey.'

'I think you're mistaken. He's a very clever man. But he's not fond of being about when I'm there, because he doesn't like me.'

'What could be more asinine than that? Did you say she has looks?' Osmond went on.

'Yes; but I won't say it again, lest you should be disappointed in them. Come and make a beginning; that's all I ask of you.'

'A beginning of what?'

Madame Merle was silent a little. 'I want you of course to marry her.'

'The beginning of the end? Well, I'll see for myself. Have you told her that?'

'For what do you take me? She's not so coarse a piece of machinery—nor am I.'

'Really,' said Osmond after some meditation, 'I don't understand your ambitions.'

'I think you'll understand this one after you've seen Miss Archer. Suspend your judgement.' Madame Merle, as she spoke, had drawn near the open door of the garden, where she stood a moment looking out. 'Pansy has really grown pretty,' she presently added.

'So it seemed to me.'

'But she has had enough of the convent.'

'I don't know,' said Osmond. 'I like what they've made of her. It's very charming.'

'That's not the convent. It's the child's nature.'

'It's the combination, I think. She's as pure as a pearl.'

'Why doesn't she come back with my flowers then?' Madame Merle asked. 'She's not in a hurry.'

'We'll go and get them.'

'She doesn't like me,' the visitor murmured as she raised her parasol and they passed into the garden.

XXIII

MADAME MERLE, who had come to Florence on Mrs Touchett's arrival at the invitation of this lady—Mrs Touchett offering her for a month the hospitality of Palazzo Crescentini—the judicious Madame Merle spoke to Isabel afresh about Gilbert Osmond and expressed the hope she might know him; making, however, no such point of the matter as we have seen her do in recommending the girl herself to Mr Osmond's attention. The reason of this was perhaps that Isabel offered no resistance whatever to Madame Merle's proposal. In Italy, as in England, the lady had a multitude of friends, both among the natives of the country and its heterogeneous visitors. She had mentioned to Isabel most of the people the girl would find it well to 'meet'—of course, she said, Isabel could know whomever in the wide world she would—and had placed Mr Osmond near the top of the list. He was an old friend of her own; she had known him these dozen years; he was one of the cleverest and most agreeable men—well, in Europe simply. He was altogether above the respectable average; quite another affair. He wasn't a professional charmer—far from it, and the effect he produced depended a good deal on the state of his nerves and his spirits. When not in the right mood he could fall as low as any one, saved only by his looking at such hours rather like a demoralised prince in exile. But if he cared or was interested or rightly challenged—just exactly rightly it had to be—then one felt his cleverness and his distinction. Those qualities didn't depend, in him, as in so many people, on his not committing or exposing himself. He had his perversities—which indeed Isabel would find to be the case with all the men really worth knowing—and didn't cause his light to shine equally for all persons. Madame Merle, however, thought she could undertake that for Isabel he would be brilliant. He was easily bored, too easily, and dull people always put him out; but a quick and cultivated girl like Isabel would give him a stimulus which was too absent from his life. At any rate he was a person not to miss. One shouldn't attempt to live in Italy without making a friend of Gilbert Osmond, who knew more about the country than any one except two or three German professors. And if they had more knowledge than he it was he who had most perception and taste—being artistic through and through. Isabel remembered that her friend had spoken of him during their plunge, at Gardencourt, into the deeps of talk, and wondered a little what was the nature of the tie binding these superior spirits. She felt that Madame Merle's ties always somehow had histories, and such an impression was part of the interest created by this inordinate woman. As regards her relations with Mr Osmond, however, she hinted at nothing but a longestablished calm friendship. Isabel said she should be happy to know a person who had enjoyed so high a confidence for so many years. 'You ought to see a great many men,' Madame Merle remarked; 'you ought to see as many as possible, so as to get used to them.'

'Used to them?' Isabel repeated with that solemn stare which sometimes seemed to proclaim her deficient in the sense of comedy. 'Why, I'm not afraid of them—I'm as used to them as the cook to the butcher-boys.'

'Used to them, I mean, so as to despise them. That's what one comes to with most of them. You'll pick out, for your society, the few whom you don't despise.'

This was a note of cynicism that Madame Merle didn't often allow herself to sound; but Isabel was not alarmed, for she had never supposed that as one saw more of the world the sentiment of respect became the most active of one's emotions. It was excited, none the less, by the beautiful city of Florence, which pleased her not less than Madame Merle had promised; and if her unassisted perception had not been able to gauge its charms she had clever companions as priests to the mystery. She was in no want indeed of aesthetic illumination, for Ralph found it a joy that renewed his own early passion to act as cicerone to his eager young kinswoman. Madame Merle remained at home; she had seen the treasures of Florence again and again and had always something else to do. But she talked of all things with remarkable vividness of memory—she recalled the right-hand corner of the large Perugino and the position of the hands of the Saint Elizabeth* in the picture next to it. She had her opinions as to the character of many famous works of art, differing often from Ralph with great sharpness and defending her interpretations with as much ingenuity as good-humour. Isabel listened to the discussions taking place between the two with a sense that she might derive much benefit from them and that they were among the advantages she couldn't have enjoyed for instance in Albany. In the clear May mornings before the formal breakfast—this repast at Mrs Touchett's was served at twelve o'clock—she wandered with her cousin through the narrow and sombre Florentine streets, resting a while in the thicker dusk of some historic church or the vaulted chambers of some dispeopled convent. She went to the galleries and palaces; she looked at the pictures

and statues that had hitherto been great names to her, and exchanged for a knowledge which was sometimes a limitation a presentiment which proved usually to have been a blank. She performed all those acts of mental prostration in which, on a first visit to Italy, youth and enthusiasm so freely indulge; she felt her heart beat in the presence of immortal genius and knew the sweetness of rising tears in eyes to which faded fresco and darkened marble grew dim. But the return, every day, was even pleasanter than the going forth; the return into the wide, monumental court of the great house in which Mrs Touchett, many years before, had established herself, and into the high, cool rooms where the carven rafters and pompous frescoes of the sixteenth century looked down on the familiar commodities of the age of advertisement. Mrs Touchett inhabited an historic building in a narrow street whose very name recalled the strife of mediæval factions; and found compensation for the darkness of her frontage in the modicity of her rent and the brightness of a garden where nature itself looked as archaic as the rugged architecture of the palace and which cleared and scented the rooms in regular use. To live in such a place was, for Isabel, to hold to her ear all day a shell of the sea of the past. This vague eternal rumour kept her imagination awake.*

Gilbert Osmond came to see Madame Merle, who presented him to the young lady lurking at the other side of the room. Isabel took on this occasion little part in the talk; she scarcely even smiled when the others turned to her invitingly; she sat there as if she had been at the play and had paid even a large sum for her place. Mrs Touchett was not present, and these two had it, for the effect of brilliancy, all their own way. They talked of the Florentine, the Roman, the cosmopolite world, and might have been distinguished performers figuring for a charity. It all had the rich readiness that would have come from rehearsal. Madame Merle appealed to her as if she had been on the stage, but she could ignore any learnt cue without spoiling the scene—though of course she thus put dreadfully in the wrong the friend who had told Mr Osmond she could be depended on. This was no matter for once; even if more had been involved she could have made no attempt to shine. There was something in the visitor that checked her and held her in suspense—made it more important she should get an impression of him than that she should produce one herself. Besides, she had little skill in producing an impression which she knew to be expected: nothing could be happier, in general, than to seem dazzling, but she had a perverse unwillingness to glitter by arrangement. Mr Osmond, to do him justice, had a well-bred air of expecting nothing, a quiet ease that covered everything, even the first show of his own wit. This was the more grateful as his face, his head, was sensitive; he was not handsome, but he was fine, as fine as one of the drawings in the long gallery above the bridge of the Uffizi. And his very voice was fine—the more strangely that, with its clearness, it yet somehow wasn't sweet. This had had really to do with making her abstain from interference. His utterance was the vibration of glass, and if she had put out her finger she might have changed the pitch and spoiled the concert. Yet before he went she had to speak.

'Madame Merle,' he said, 'consents to come up to my hill-top some day next week and drink tea in my garden. It would give me much pleasure if you would come with her. It's thought rather pretty—there's what they call a general view. My daughter too would be so glad—or rather, for she's too young to have strong emotions, *I* should be so glad—so very glad.' And Mr Osmond paused with a slight air of embarrassment, leaving his sentence unfinished. 'I should be so happy if you could know my daughter,' he went on a moment afterwards.

Isabel replied that she should be delighted to see Miss Osmond and that if Madame Merle would show her the way to the hill-top she should be very grateful. Upon this assurance the visitor took his leave; after which Isabel fully expected her friend would scold her for having been so stupid. But to her surprise that lady, who indeed never fell into the mere matter-of–course, said to her in a few moments: 'You were charming, my dear; you were just as one would have wished you. You're never disappointing.'

A rebuke might possibly have been irritating, though it is much more probable that Isabel would have taken it in good part; but, strange to say, the words that Madame Merle actually used caused her the first feeling of displeasure she had known this ally to excite. 'That's more than I intended,' she answered coldly. 'I'm under no obligation that I know of to charm Mr Osmond.'

Madame Merle perceptibly flushed, but we know it was not her habit to retract. 'My dear child, I didn't speak for him, poor man; I spoke for yourself. It's not of course a question as to his liking you; it matters little whether he likes you or not! But I thought you liked *him*.'

'I did,' said Isabel honestly. 'But I don't see what that matters either.'

'Everything that concerns you matters to me,' Madame Merle returned with her weary nobleness; 'especially when at the same time another old friend's concerned.'

Whatever Isabel's obligations may have been to Mr Osmond, it must be admitted that she found them sufficient to lead her to put to Ralph sundry questions about him. She thought Ralph's judgements

distorted by his trials, but she flattered herself she had learned to make allowance for that.

'Do I know him?' said her cousin. 'Oh, yes, I "know" him; not well, but on the whole enough. I've never cultivated his society, and he apparently has never found mine indispensable to his happiness. Who is he, what is he? He's a vague, unexplained American who has been living these thirty years, or less, in Italy. Why do I call him unexplained? Only as a cover for my ignorance; I don't know his antecedents, his family, his origin. For all I do know he may be a prince in disguise; he rather looks like one, by the way—like a prince who has abdicated in a fit of fastidiousness and has been in a state of disgust ever since. He used to live in Rome; but of late years he has taken up his abode here; I remember hearing him say that Rome has grown vulgar. He has a great dread of vulgarity; that's his special line; he hasn't any other that I know of. He lives on his income, which I suspect of not being vulgarly large. He's a poor but honest gentleman—that's what he calls himself. He married young and lost his wife, and I believe he has a daughter. He also has a sister, who's married to some small Count or other, of these parts; I remember meeting her of old. She's nicer than he, I should think, but rather impossible. I remember there used to be some stories about her. I don't think I recommend you to know her. But why don't you ask Madame Merle about these people? She knows them all much better than I.'

'I ask you because I want your opinion as well as hers,' said Isabel.

'A fig for my opinion! If you fall in love with Mr Osmond what will you care for that?'

'Not much, probably. But meanwhile it has a certain importance. The more information one has about one's dangers the better.'

'I don't agree to that—it may make them dangers. We know too much about people in these days; we hear too much. Our ears, our minds, our mouths, are stuffed with personalities. Don't mind anything any one tells you about any one else. Judge every one and everything for yourself.'

'That's what I try to do,' said Isabel; 'but when you do that people call you conceited.'

'You're not to mind them—that's precisely my argument; not to mind what they say about yourself any more than what they say about your friend or your enemy.'

Isabel considered. 'I think you're right; but there are some things I can't help minding: for instance when my friend's attacked or when I myself am praised.'

'Of course you're always at liberty to judge the critic. Judge people as critics, however,' Ralph added, 'and you'll condemn them all!'

'I shall see Mr Osmond for myself,' said Isabel. 'I've promised to pay him a visit.'

'To pay him a visit?'

'To go and see his view, his pictures, his daughter—I don't know exactly what. Madame Merle's to take me; she tells me a great many ladies call on him.'

'Ah, with Madame Merle you may go anywhere, *de confiance*,'* said Ralph. 'She knows none but the best people.'

Isabel said no more about Mr Osmond, but she presently remarked to her cousin that she was not satisfied with his tone about Madame Merle. 'It seems to me you insinuate things about her. I don't know what you mean, but if you've any grounds for disliking her I think you should either mention them frankly or else say nothing at all.'

Ralph, however, resented this charge with more apparent earnestness than he commonly used. 'I speak of Madame Merle exactly as I speak to her: with an even exaggerated respect.'

'Exaggerated, precisely. That's what I complain of.'

'I do so because Madame Merle's merits are exaggerated.'

'By whom, pray? By me? If so I do her a poor service.'

'No, no; by herself.'

'Ah, I protest!' Isabel earnestly cried. 'If ever there was a woman who made small claims——!'

'You put your finger on it,' Ralph interrupted. 'Her modesty's exaggerated. She has no business with small claims—she has a perfect right to make large ones.'

'Her merits are large then. You contradict yourself.'

'Her merits are immense,' said Ralph. 'She's indescribably blameless; a pathless desert of virtue; the only woman I know who never gives one a chance.'

'A chance for what?'

'Well, say to call her a fool! She's the only woman I know who has but that one little fault.'

Isabel turned away with impatience. 'I don't understand you; you're too paradoxical for my plain

mind.'

'Let me explain. When I say she exaggerates I don't mean it in the vulgar sense—that she boasts, overstates, gives too fine an account of herself. I mean literally that she pushes the search for perfection too far—that her merits are in themselves overstrained. She's too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything. She's too complete, in a word. I confess to you that she acts on my nerves and that I feel about her a good deal as that intensely human Athenian felt about Aristides* the Just.'

Isabel looked hard at her cousin; but the mocking spirit, if it lurked in his words, failed on this occasion to peep from his face. 'Do you wish Madame Merle to be banished?'

'By no means. She's much too good company. I delight in Madame Merle,' said Ralph Touchett simply.

'You're very odious, sir!' Isabel exclaimed. And then she asked him if he knew anything that was not to the honour of her brilliant friend.

'Nothing whatever. Don't you see that's just what I mean? On the character of every one else you may find some little black speck; if I were to take half an hour to it, some day, I've no doubt I should be able to find one on yours. For my own, of course, I'm spotted like a leopard. But on Madame Merle's nothing, nothing, nothing!'

'That's just what I think!' said Isabel with a toss of her head. 'That is why I like her so much.'

'She's a capital person for you to know. Since you wish to see the world you couldn't have a better guide.'

'I suppose you mean by that that she's worldly?'

'Worldly? No,' said Ralph, 'she's the great round world itself!'

It had certainly not, as Isabel for the moment took it into her head to believe, been a refinement of malice in him to say that he delighted in Madame Merle. Ralph Touchett took his refreshment wherever he could find it, and he would not have forgotten himself if he had been left wholly unbeguiled by such a mistress of the social art. There are deep-lying sympathies and antipathies, and it may have been that, in spite of the administered justice she enjoyed at his hands, her absence from his mother's house would not have made life barren to him. But Ralph Touchett had learned more or less inscrutably to attend, and there could have been nothing so 'sustained' to attend to as the general performance of Madame Merle. He tasted her in sips, he let her stand, with an opportuneness she herself could not have surpassed. There were moments when he felt almost sorry for her; and these, oddly enough, were the moments when his kindness was least demonstrative. He was sure she had been yearningly ambitious and that what she had visibly accomplished was far below her secret measure. She had got herself into perfect training, but had won none of the prizes. She was always plain Madame Merle, the widow of a Swiss *négociant*,* with a small income and a large acquaintance, who stayed with people a great deal and was almost as universally 'liked' as some new volume of smooth twaddle. The contrast between this position and any one of some half-dozen others that he supposed to have at various moments engaged her hope had an element of the tragical. His mother thought he got on beautifully with their genial guest; to Mrs Touchett's sense two persons who dealt so largely in too-ingenious theories of conduct—that is of their own—would have much in common. He had given due consideration to Isabel's intimacy with her eminent friend, having long since made up his mind that he could not, without opposition, keep his cousin to himself; and he made the best of it, as he had done of worse things. He believed it would take care of itself; it wouldn't last forever. Neither of these two superior persons knew the other as well as she supposed, and when each had made an important discovery or two there would be, if not a rupture, at least a relaxation. Meanwhile he was quite willing to admit that the conversation of the elder lady was an advantage to the younger, who had a great deal to learn and would doubtless learn it better from Madame Merle than from some other instructors of the young. It was not probable that Isabel would be injured.

XXIV

IT would certainly have been hard to see what injury could arise to her from the visit she presently paid to Mr Osmond's hill-top. Nothing could have been more charming than this occasion—a soft afternoon in the full maturity of the Tuscan spring. The companions drove out of the Roman Gate, beneath the enormous blank superstructure which crowns the fine clear arch of that portal and makes it nakedly impressive, and wound between high-walled lanes into which the wealth of blossoming orchards overdrooped and flung a fragrance, until they reached the small superurban piazza, of crooked shape, where the long brown wall of the villa occupied in part by Mr Osmond formed a principal, or at least a very imposing, object. Isabel went with her friend through a wide, high court, where a clear shadow rested below and a pair of light-arched galleries, facing each other above, caught the upper sunshine upon their slim columns and the flowering plants in which they were dressed. There was something grave and strong in the place; it looked somehow as if, once you were in, you would need an act of energy to get out. For Isabel, however, there was of course as yet no thought of getting out, but only of advancing. Mr Osmond met her in the cold antechamber—it was cold even in the month of May—and ushered her, with her conductress, into the apartment to which we have already been introduced. Madame Merle was in front, and while Isabel lingered a little, talking with him, she went forward familiarly and greeted two persons who were seated in the saloon. One of these was little Pansy, on whom she bestowed a kiss; the other was a lady whom Mr Osmond indicated to Isabel as his sister, the Countess Gemini. 'And that's my little girl,' he said, 'who has just come out of her convent.'

Pansy had on a scant white dress, and her fair hair was neatly arranged in a net; she wore her small shoes tied sandal-fashion about her ankles. She made Isabel a little conventual curtsey and then came to be kissed. The Countess Gemini simply nodded without getting up: Isabel could see she was a woman of high fashion. She was thin and dark and not at all pretty, having features that suggested some tropical bird—a long beak-like nose, small, quickly-moving eyes and a mouth and chin that receded extremely. Her expression, however, thanks to various intensities of emphasis and wonder, of horror and joy, was not inhuman, and, as regards her appearance, it was plain she understood herself and made the most of her points. Her attire, voluminous and delicate, bristling with elegance, had the look of shimmering plumage, and her attitudes were as light and sudden as those of a creature who perched upon twigs. She had a great deal of manner; Isabel, who had never known any one with so much manner, immediately classed her as the most affected of women. She remembered that Ralph had not recommended her as an acquaintance; but she was ready to acknowledge that to a casual view the Countess Gemini revealed no depths.* Her demonstrations suggested the violent waving of some flag of general truce—white silk with fluttering streamers.

'You'll believe I'm glad to see you when I tell you it's only because I knew you were to be here that I came myself. I don't come and see my brother—I make him come and see me. This hill of his is impossible—I don't see what possesses him. Really, Osmond, you'll be the ruin of my horses some day, and if it hurts them you'll have to give me another pair. I heard them wheezing to-day; I assure you I did. It's very disagreeable to hear one's horses wheezing when one's sitting in the carriage; it sounds too as if they weren't what they should be. But I've always had good horses; whatever else I may have lacked I've always managed that. My husband doesn't know much, but I think he knows a horse. In general Italians don't, but my husband goes in, according to his poor light, for everything English. My horses are English—so it's all the greater pity they should be ruined. I must tell you,' she went on, directly addressing Isabel, 'that Osmond doesn't often invite me; I don't think he likes to have me. It was quite my own idea, coming to-day. I like to see new people, and I'm sure you're very new. But don't sit there; that chair's not what it looks. There are some very good seats here, but there are also some horrors.'

These remarks were delivered with a series of little jerks and pecks, of roulades of shrillness, and in an accent that was as some fond recall of good English, or rather of good American, in adversity.

'I don't like to have you, my dear?' said her brother. 'I'm sure you're invaluable.'

'I don't see any horrors anywhere,' Isabel returned, looking about her. 'Everything seems to me beautiful and precious.'

'I've a few good things,' Mr Osmond allowed; 'indeed I've nothing very bad. But I've not what I should have liked.'

He stood there a little awkwardly, smiling and glancing about; his manner was an odd mixture of the detached and the involved. He seemed to hint that nothing but the right 'values' was of any consequence. Isabel made a rapid induction: perfect simplicity was not the badge of his family. Even the little girl from the convent, who, in her prim white dress, with her small submissive face and her hands locked before her, stood there as if she were about to partake of her first communion, even Mr Osmond's diminutive daughter had a kind of finish that was not entirely artless.

'You'd have liked a few things from the Uffizi and the Pitti*—that's what you'd have liked,' said Madame Merle.

'Poor Osmond, with his old curtains and crucifixes!' the Countess Gemini exclaimed: she appeared to call her brother only by his family-name. Her ejaculation had no particular object; she smiled at Isabel as she made it and looked at her from head to foot.

Her brother had not heard her; he seemed to be thinking what he could say to Isabel. 'Won't you have some tea?—you must be very tired,' he at last bethought himself of remarking.

'No, indeed, I'm not tired; what have I done to tire me?' Isabel felt a certain need of being very direct, of pretending to nothing; there was something in the air, in her general impression of things—she could hardly have said what it was—that deprived her of all disposition to put herself forward. The place, the occasion, the combination of people, signified more than lay on the surface; she would try to understand—she would not simply utter graceful platitudes. Poor Isabel was doubtless not aware that many women would have uttered graceful platitudes to cover the working of their observation. It must be confessed that her pride was a trifle alarmed. A man she had heard spoken of in terms that excited interest and who was evidently capable of distinguishing himself, had invited her, a young lady not lavish of her favours, to come to his house. Now that she had done so the burden of the entertainment rested naturally on his wit. Isabel was not rendered less observant, and for the moment, we judge, she was not rendered more indulgent, by perceiving that Mr Osmond carried his burden less complacently than might have been expected. 'What a fool I was to have let myself so needlessly in—!' she could fancy his exclaiming to himself.

'You'll be tired when you go home, if he shows you all his bibelots* and gives you a lecture on each,' said the Countess Gemini.

'I'm not afraid of that; but if I'm tired I shall at least have learned something.'

'Very little, I suspect. But my sister's dreadfully afraid of learning anything,' said Mr Osmond.

'Oh, I confess to that; I don't want to know anything more—I know too much already. The more you know the more unhappy you are.'

'You should not undervalue knowledge before Pansy, who has not finished her education,' Madame Merle interposed with a smile.

'Pansy will never know any harm,' said the child's father. 'Pansy's a little convent-flower.'

'Oh, the convents, the convents!' cried the Countess with a flutter of her ruffles. 'Speak to me of the convents! You may learn anything there; I'm a convent-flower myself. I don't pretend to be good, but the nuns do. Don't you see what I mean?' she went on, appealing to Isabel.

Isabel was not sure she saw, and she answered that she was very bad at following arguments. The Countess then declared that she herself detested arguments, but that this was her brother's taste—he would always discuss. 'For me,' she said, 'one should like a thing or one shouldn't; one can't like everything, of course. But one shouldn't attempt to reason it out—you never know where it may lead you. There are some very good feelings that may have bad reasons, don't you know? And then there are very bad feelings, sometimes, that have good reasons. Don't you see what I mean? I don't care anything about reasons, but I know what I like.'

'Ah, that's the great thing,' said Isabel, smiling and suspecting that her acquaintance with this lightly-flitting personage would not lead to intellectual repose. If the Countess objected to argument Isabel at this moment had as little taste for it, and she put out her hand to Pansy with a pleasant sense that such a gesture committed her to nothing that would admit of a divergence of views. Gilbert Osmond apparently took a rather hopeless view of his sister's tone; he turned the conversation to another topic. He presently sat down on the other side of his daughter, who had shyly brushed Isabel's fingers with her own; but he ended by drawing her out of her chair and making her stand between his knees, leaning against him while he passed his arm round her slimness. The child fixed her eyes on Isabel with a still, disinterested gaze which seemed void of an intention, yet conscious of an attraction. Mr Osmond talked of many things; Madame Merle had said he could be agreeable when he chose, and to-day, after a little, he appeared not only to have chosen but to have determined. Madame Merle and the Countess Gemini sat a

little apart, conversing in the effortless manner of persons who knew each other well enough to take their ease; but every now and then Isabel heard the Countess, at something said by her companion, plunge into the latter's lucidity as a poodle splashes after a thrown stick. It was as if Madame Merle were seeing how far she would go. Mr Osmond talked of Florence, of Italy, of the pleasure of living in that country and of the abatements to the pleasure. There were both satisfactions and drawbacks; the drawbacks were numerous; strangers were too apt to see such a world as all romantic. It met the case soothingly for the human, for the social failure—by which he meant the people who couldn't 'realise,' as they said, on their sensibility: they could keep it about them there, in their poverty, without ridicule, as you might keep an heirloom or an inconvenient entailed place that brought you in nothing. Thus there were advantages in living in the country which contained the greatest sum of beauty. Certain impressions you could get only there. Others, favourable to life, you never got, and you got some that were very bad. But from time to time you got one of a quality that made up for everything. Italy, all the same, had spoiled a great many people; he was even fatuous enough to believe at times that he himself might have been a better man if he had spent less of his life there. It made one idle and dilettantish and second-rate; it had no discipline for the character, didn't cultivate in you, otherwise expressed, the successful social and other 'cheek' that flourished in Paris and London. 'We're sweetly provincial,' said Mr Osmond, 'and I'm perfectly aware that I myself am as rusty as a key that has no lock to fit it. It polishes me up a little to talk with you—not that I venture to pretend I can turn that very complicated lock I suspect your intellect of being! But you'll be going away before I've seen you three times, and I shall perhaps never see you after that. That's what it is to live in a country that people come to. When they're disagreeable here it's bad enough; when they're agreeable it's still worse. As soon as you like them they're off again! I've been deceived too often; I've ceased to form attachments, to permit myself to feel attractions. You mean to stay—to settle? That would be really comfortable. Ah yes, your aunt's a sort of guarantee; I believe she may be depended on. Oh, she's an old Florentine; I mean literally an old one; not a modern outsider. She's a contemporary of the Medici;* she must have been present at the burning of Savonarola,* and I'm not sure she didn't throw a handful of chips into the flame. Her face is very much like some faces in the early pictures; little, dry, definite faces that must have had a good deal of expression, but almost always the same one. Indeed I can show you her portrait in a fresco of Ghirlandaio's.* I hope you don't object to my speaking that way of your aunt, eh? I've an idea you don't. Perhaps you think that's even worse. I assure you there's no want of respect in it, to either of you. You know I'm a particular admirer of Mrs Touchett.'

While Isabel's host exerted himself to entertain her in this somewhat confidential fashion she looked occasionally at Madame Merle, who met her eyes with an inattentive smile in which, on this occasion, there was no infelicitous intimation that our heroine appeared to advantage. Madame Merle eventually proposed to the Countess Gemini that they should go into the garden, and the Countess, rising and shaking out her feathers, began to rustle toward the door. 'Poor Miss Archer!' she exclaimed, surveying the other group with expressive compassion. 'She has been brought quite into the family.'

'Miss Archer can certainly have nothing but sympathy for a family to which you belong,' Mr Osmond answered, with a laugh which, though it had something of a mocking ring, had also a finer patience.

'I don't know what you mean by that! I'm sure she'll see no harm in me but what you tell her. I'm better than he says, Miss Archer,' the Countess went on. 'I'm only rather an idiot and a bore. Is that all he has said? Ah then, you keep him in good-humour. Has he opened on one of his favourite subjects? I give you notice that there are two or three that he treats *à fond*.* In that case you had better take off your bonnet.'

'I don't think I know what Mr Osmond's favourite subjects are,' said Isabel, who had risen to her feet.

The Countess assumed for an instant an attitude of intense meditation, pressing one of her hands, with the finger-tips gathered together, to her forehead. 'I'll tell you in a moment. One's Machiavelli;* the other's Vittoria Colonna;* the next is Metastasio.'*

'Ah, with me,' said Madame Merle, passing her arm into the Countess Gemini's as if to guide her course to the garden, 'Mr Osmond's never so historical.'

'Oh you,' the Countess answered as they moved away, 'you yourself are Machiavelli—you yourself are Vittoria Colonna!'

'We shall hear next that poor Madame Merle is Metastasio!' Gilbert Osmond resignedly sighed.

Isabel had got up on the assumption that they too were to go into the garden; but her host stood there with no apparent inclination to leave the room, his hands in the pockets of his jacket and his daughter, who had now locked her arm into one of his own, clinging to him and looking up while her eyes moved from his own face to Isabel's. Isabel waited, with a certain unuttered contentedness, to have her movements directed; she liked Mr Osmond's talk, his company: she had what always gave her a very

private thrill, the consciousness of a new relation. Through the open doors of the great room she saw Madame Merle and the Countess stroll across the fine grass of the garden; then she turned, and her eyes wandered over the things scattered about her. The understanding had been that Mr Osmond should show her his treasures; his pictures and cabinets all looked like treasures. Isabel after a moment went toward one of the pictures to see it better; but just as she had done so he said to her abruptly: 'Miss Archer, what do you think of my sister?'

She faced him with some surprise. 'Ah, don't ask me that—I've seen your sister too little.'

'Yes, you've seen her very little; but you must have observed that there is not a great deal of her to see. What do you think of our family tone?' he went on with his cool smile. 'I should like to know how it strikes a fresh, unprejudiced mind. I know what you're going to say—you've had almost no observation of it. Of course this is only a glimpse. But just take notice, in future, if you have a chance. I sometimes think we've got into a rather bad way, living off here among things and people not our own, without responsibilities or attachments, with nothing to hold us together or keep us up; marrying foreigners, forming artificial tastes, playing tricks with our natural mission. Let me add, though, that I say that much more for myself than for my sister. She's a very honest lady—more so than she seems. She's rather unhappy, and as she's not of a serious turn she doesn't tend to show it tragically: she shows it comically instead. She has got a horrid husband, though I'm not sure she makes the best of him. Of course, however, a horrid husband's an awkward thing. Madame Merle gives her excellent advice, but it's a good deal like giving a child a dictionary to learn a language with. He can look out the words, but he can't put them together. My sister needs a grammar, but unfortunately she's not grammatical. Pardon my troubling you with these details; my sister was very right in saying you've been taken into the family. Let me take down that picture; you want more light.'

He took down the picture, carried it toward the window, related some curious facts about it. She looked at the other works of art, and he gave her such further information as might appear most acceptable to a young lady making a call on a summer afternoon. His pictures, his medallions and tapestries were interesting; but after a while Isabel felt the owner much more so, and independently of them, thickly as they seemed to overhang him. He resembled no one she had ever seen; most of the people she knew might be divided into groups of half a dozen specimens. There were one or two exceptions to this; she could think for instance of no group that would contain her aunt Lydia. There were other people who were, relatively speaking, original—original, as one might say, by courtesy—such as Mr Goodwood, as her cousin Ralph, as Henrietta Stackpole, as Lord Warburton, as Madame Merle. But in essentials, when one came to look at them, these individuals belonged to types already present to her mind. Her mind contained no class offering a natural place to Mr Osmond—he was a specimen apart. It was not that she recognised all these truths at the hour, but they were falling into order before her. For the moment she only said to herself that this 'new relation' would perhaps prove her very most distinguished. Madame Merle had had that note of rarity, but what quite other power it immediately gained when sounded by a man! It was not so much what he said and did, but rather what he withheld, that marked him for her as by one of those signs of the highly curious that he was showing her on the underside of old plates and in the corner of sixteenth-century drawings: he indulged in no striking deflections from common usage, he was an original without being an eccentric. She had never met a person of so fine a grain. The peculiarity was physical, to begin with, and it extended to impalpabilities. His dense, delicate hair, his overdrawn, retouched features, his clear complexion, ripe without being coarse, the very evenness of the growth of his beard, and that light, smooth slenderness of structure which made the movement of a single one of his fingers produce the effect of an expressive gesture—these personal points struck our sensitive young woman as signs of quality, of intensity, somehow as promises of interest. He was certainly fastidious and critical; he was probably irritable. His sensibility had governed him—possibly governed him too much; it had made him impatient of vulgar troubles and had led him to live by himself, in a sorted, sifted, arranged world, thinking about art and beauty and history. He had consulted his taste in everything—his taste alone perhaps, as a sick man consciously incurable consults at last only his lawyer: that was what made him so different from every one else. Ralph had something of this same quality, this appearance of thinking that life was a matter of connoisseurship; but in Ralph it was an anomaly, a kind of humorous excrescence, whereas in Mr Osmond it was the keynote, and everything was in harmony with it. She was certainly far from understanding him completely; his meaning was not at all times obvious. It was hard to see what he meant for instance by speaking of his provincial side—which was exactly the side she would have taken him most to lack. Was it a harmless paradox, intended to puzzle her? or was it the last refinement of high culture? She trusted she should learn in time; it would be very interesting to learn. If it was provincial to have that harmony, what then was the finish of the capital? And she could put this question in spite of so feeling her host a sly

personage; since such shyness as his—the shyness of ticklish nerves and fine perceptions—was perfectly consistent with the best breeding. Indeed it was almost a proof of standards and touchstones other than the vulgar: he must be so sure the vulgar would be first on the ground. He wasn't a man of easy assurance, who chatted and gossiped with the fluency of a superficial nature; he was critical of himself as well as of others, and, exacting a good deal of others, to think them agreeable, probably took a rather ironical view of what he himself offered: a proof into the bargain that he was not grossly conceited. If he had not been shy he wouldn't have effected that gradual, subtle, successful conversion of it to which she owed both what pleased her in him and what mystified her. If he had suddenly asked her what she thought of the Countess Gemini, that was doubtless a proof that he was interested in her; it could scarcely be as a help to knowledge of his own sister. That he should be so interested showed an enquiring mind; but it was a little singular he should sacrifice his fraternal feeling to his curiosity. This was the most eccentric thing he had done.

There were two other rooms, beyond the one in which she had been received, equally full of romantic objects, and in these apartments Isabel spent a quarter of an hour. Everything was in the last degree curious and precious, and Mr Osmond continued to be the kindest of ciceroni* as he led her from one fine piece to another and still held his little girl by the hand. His kindness almost surprised our young friend, who wondered why he should take so much trouble for her; and she was oppressed at last with the accumulation of beauty and knowledge to which she found herself introduced. There was enough for the present; she had ceased to attend to what he said; she listened to him with attentive eyes, but was not thinking of what he told her. He probably thought her quicker, cleverer in every way, more prepared, than she was. Madame Merle would have pleasantly exaggerated; which was a pity, because in the end he would be sure to find out, and then perhaps even her real intelligence wouldn't reconcile him to his mistake. A part of Isabel's fatigue came from the effort to appear as intelligent as she believed Madame Merle had described her, and from the fear (very unusual with her) of exposing—not her ignorance; for that she cared comparatively little—but her possible grossness of perception. It would have annoyed her to express a liking for something he, in his superior enlightenment, would think she oughtn't to like; or to pass by something at which the truly initiated mind would arrest itself. She had no wish to fall into that grotesqueness—in which she had seen women (and it was a warning) serenely, yet ignobly, flounder. She was very careful therefore as to what she said, as to what she noticed or failed to notice; more careful than she had ever been before.

They came back into the first of the rooms, where the tea had been served; but as the two other ladies were still on the terrace, and as Isabel had not yet been made acquainted with the view, the paramount distinction of the place, Mr Osmond directed her steps into the garden without more delay. Madame Merle and the Countess had had chairs brought out, and as the afternoon was lovely the Countess proposed they should take their tea in the open air. Pansy therefore was sent to bid the servant bring out the preparations. The sun had got low, the golden light took a deeper tone, and on the mountains and the plain that stretched beneath them the masses of purple shadow glowed as richly as the places that were still exposed. The scene had an extraordinary charm. The air was almost solemnly still, and the large expanse of the landscape, with its gardenlike culture and nobleness of outline, its teeming valley and delicatelyfretted hills, its peculiarly human-looking touches of habitation, lay there in splendid harmony and classic grace. 'You seem so well pleased that I think you can be trusted to come back,' Osmond said as he led his companion to one of the angles of the terrace.

'I shall certainly come back,' she returned, 'in spite of what you say about its being bad to live in Italy. What was that you said about one's natural mission? I wonder if I should forsake my natural mission if I were to settle in Florence.'

'A woman's natural mission is to be where she's most appreciated.'

'The point's to find out where that is.'

'Very true—she often wastes a great deal of time in the enquiry. People ought to make it very plain to her.'

'Such a matter would have to be made very plain to me,' smiled Isabel.

'I'm glad, at any rate, to hear you talk of settling. Madame Merle had given me an idea that you were of a rather roving disposition. I thought she spoke of your having some plan of going round the world.'

'I'm rather ashamed of my plans; I make a new one every day.'

'I don't see why you should be ashamed; it's the greatest of pleasures.'

'It seems frivolous, I think,' said Isabel. 'One ought to choose something very deliberately, and be faithful to that.'

‘By that rule then, I’ve not been frivolous.’

‘Have you never made plans?’

‘Yes, I made one years ago, and I’m acting on it to-day.’

‘It must have been a very pleasant one,’ Isabel permitted herself to observe.

‘It was very simple. It was to be as quiet as possible.’

‘As quiet?’ the girl repeated.

‘Not to worry—not to strive nor struggle. To resign myself. To be content with little.’ He spoke these sentences slowly, with short pauses between, and his intelligent regard was fixed on his visitor’s with the conscious air of a man who has brought himself to confess something.

‘Do you call that simple?’ she asked with mild irony.

‘Yes, because it’s negative.’

‘Has your life been negative?’

‘Call it affirmative if you like. Only it has affirmed my indifference. Mind you, not my natural indifference—I had none. But my studied, my wilful renunciation.’

She scarcely understood him; it seemed a question whether he were joking or not. Why should a man who struck her as having a great fund of reserve suddenly bring himself to be so confidential? This was his affair, however, and his confidences were interesting. ‘I don’t see why you should have renounced,’ she said in a moment.

‘Because I could do nothing. I had no prospects, I was poor, and I was not a man of genius. I had no talents even; I took my measure early in life. I was simply the most fastidious young gentleman living. There were two or three people in the world I envied—the Emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey! There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome—for the consideration he enjoys. I should have been delighted to be considered to that extent; but since that couldn’t be I didn’t care for anything less, and I made up my mind not to go in for honours. The leanest gentleman can always consider himself, and fortunately I was, though lean, a gentleman. I could do nothing in Italy—I couldn’t even be an Italian patriot. To do that I should have had to get out of the country; and I was too fond of it to leave it, to say nothing of my being too well satisfied with it, on the whole, as it then was, to wish it altered. So I’ve passed a great many years here on that quiet plan I spoke of. I’ve not been at all unhappy. I don’t mean to say I’ve cared for nothing; but the things I’ve cared for have been definite—limited. The events of my life have been absolutely unperceived by any one save myself; getting an old silver crucifix at a bargain (I’ve never bought anything dear, of course), or discovering, as I once did, a sketch by Correggio* on a panel daubed over by some inspired idiot.’

This would have been rather a dry account of Mr Osmond’s career if Isabel had fully believed it; but her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting. His life had been mingled with other lives more than he admitted; naturally she couldn’t expect him to enter into this. For the present she abstained from provoking further revelations; to intimate that he had not told her everything would be more familiar and less considerate than she now desired to be—would in fact be uproariously vulgar. He had certainly told her quite enough. It was her present inclination, however, to express a measured sympathy for the success with which he had preserved his independence. ‘That’s a very pleasant life,’ she said, ‘to renounce everything but Correggio!’

‘Oh, I’ve made in my way a good thing of it. Don’t imagine I’m whining about it. It’s one’s own fault if one isn’t happy.’

This was large; she kept down to something smaller. ‘Have you lived here always?’

‘No, not always. I lived a long time at Naples, and many years in Rome. But I’ve been here a good while. Perhaps I shall have to change, however; to do something else. I’ve no longer myself to think of. My daughter’s growing up and may very possibly not care so much for the Correggios and crucifixes as I. I shall have to do what’s best for Pansy.’

‘Yes, do that,’ said Isabel. ‘She’s such a dear little girl.’

‘Ah,’ cried Gilbert Osmond beautifully, ‘she’s a little saint of heaven! She is my great happiness!’

XXV

WHILE this sufficiently intimate colloquy (prolonged for some time after we cease to follow it) went forward Madame Merle and her companion, breaking a silence of some duration, had begun to exchange remarks. They were sitting in an attitude of unexpressed expectancy; an attitude especially marked on the part of the Countess Gemini, who, being of a more nervous temperament than her friend, practised with less success the art of disguising impatience. What these ladies were waiting for would not have been apparent and was perhaps not very definite to their own minds. Madame Merle waited for Osmond to release their young friend from her *tête–à–tête*, and the Countess waited because Madame Merle did. The Countess, moreover, by waiting, found the time ripe for one of her pretty perversities. She might have desired for some minutes to place it. Her brother wandered with Isabel to the end of the garden, to which point her eyes followed them.

'My dear,' she then observed to her companion, 'you'll excuse me if I don't congratulate you!'

'Very willingly, for I don't in the least know why you should.'

'Haven't you a little plan that you think rather well of?' And the Countess nodded at the sequestered couple.

Madame Merle's eyes took the same direction; then she looked serenely at her neighbour. 'You know I never understand you very well,' she smiled.

'No one can understand better than you when you wish. I see that just now you don't wish.'

'You say things to me that no one else does,' said Madame Merle gravely, yet without bitterness.

'You mean things you don't like? Doesn't Osmond sometimes say such things?'

'What your brother says has a point.'

'Yes, a poisoned one sometimes. If you mean that I'm not so clever as he you mustn't think I shall suffer from your sense of our difference. But it will be much better that you should understand me.'

'Why so?' asked Madame Merle. 'To what will it conduce?'

'If I don't approve of your plan you ought to know it in order to appreciate the danger of my interfering with it.'

Madame Merle looked as if she were ready to admit that there might be something in this; but in a moment she said quietly: 'You think me more calculating than I am.'

'It's not your calculating I think ill of; it's your calculating wrong. You've done so in this case.'

'You must have made extensive calculations yourself to discover that.'

'No, I've not had time. I've seen the girl but this once,' said the Countess, 'and the conviction has suddenly come to me. I like her very much.'

'So do I,' Madame Merle mentioned.

'You've a strange way of showing it.'

'Surely I've given her the advantage of making your acquaintance.'

'That indeed,' piped the Countess, 'is perhaps the best thing that could happen to her!'

Madame Merle said nothing for some time. The Countess's manner was odious, was really low; but it was an old story, and with her eyes upon the violet slope of Monte Morello she gave herself up to reflection. 'My dear lady,' she finally resumed, 'I advise you not to agitate yourself. The matter you allude to concerns three persons much stronger of purpose than yourself.'

'Three persons? You and Osmond of course. But is Miss Archer also very strong of purpose?'

'Quite as much so as we.'

'Ah then,' said the Countess radiantly, 'if I convince her it's her interest to resist you she'll do so successfully!'

'Resist us? Why do you express yourself so coarsely? She's not exposed to compulsion or deception.'

'I'm not sure of that. You're capable of anything, you and Osmond. I don't mean Osmond by himself, and I don't mean you by yourself. But together you're dangerous—like some chemical combination.'

'You had better leave us alone then,' smiled Madame Merle.

'I don't mean to touch you—but I shall talk to that girl.'

‘My poor Amy,’ Madame Merle murmured, ‘I don’t see what has got into your head.’

‘I take an interest in her—that’s what has got into my head. I like her.’

Madame Merle hesitated a moment. ‘I don’t think she likes you.’

The Countess’s bright little eyes expanded and her face was set in a grimace. ‘Ah, you are dangerous—even by yourself!’

‘If you want her to like you don’t abuse your brother to her,’ said Madame Merle.

‘I don’t suppose you pretend she has fallen in love with him in two interviews.’

Madame Merle looked a moment at Isabel and at the master of the house. He was leaning against the parapet, facing her, his arms folded; and she at present was evidently not lost in the mere impersonal view, persistently as she gazed at it. As Madame Merle watched her she lowered her eyes; she was listening, possibly with a certain embarrassment, while she pressed the point of her parasol into the path. Madame Merle rose from her chair. ‘Yes, I think so!’ she pronounced.

The shabby footboy, summoned by Pansy—he might, tarnished as to livery and quaint as to type, have issued from some stray sketch of old-time manners, been ‘put in’ by the brush of a Longhi or a Goya*—had come out with a small table and placed it on the grass, and then had gone back and fetched the tea-tray; after which he had again disappeared, to return with a couple of chairs. Pansy had watched these proceedings with the deepest interest, standing with her small hands folded together upon the front of her scanty frock; but she had not presumed to offer assistance. When the tea-table had been arranged, however, she gently approached her aunt.

‘Do you think papa would object to my making the tea?’

The Countess looked at her with a deliberately critical gaze and without answering her question. ‘My poor niece,’ she said, ‘is that your best frock?’

‘Ah no,’ Pansy answered, ‘it’s just a little *toilette** for common occasions.’

‘Do you call it a common occasion when I come to see you?—to say nothing of Madame Merle and the pretty lady yonder.’

Pansy reflected a moment, turning gravely from one of the persons mentioned to the other. Then her face broke into its perfect smile. ‘I have a pretty dress, but even that one’s very simple. Why should I expose it beside your beautiful things?’

‘Because it’s the prettiest you have; for me you must always wear the prettiest. Please put it on the next time. It seems to me they don’t dress you so well as they might.’

The child sparingly stroked down her antiquated skirt. ‘It’s a good little dress to make tea—don’t you think? Don’t you believe papa would allow me?’

‘Impossible for me to say, my child,’ said the Countess. ‘For me, your father’s ideas are unfathomable. Madame Merle understands them better. Ask her.’

Madame Merle smiled with her usual grace. ‘It’s a weighty question—let me think. It seems to me it would please your father to see a careful little daughter making his tea. It’s the proper duty of the daughter of the house—when she grows up.’

‘So it seems to me, Madame Merle!’ Pansy cried. ‘You shall see how well I’ll make it. A spoonful for each.’ And she began to busy herself at the table.

‘Two spoonfuls for me,’ said the Countess, who, with Madame Merle, remained for some moments watching her. ‘Listen to me, Pansy,’ the Countess resumed at last. ‘I should like to know what you think of your visitor.’

‘Ah, she’s not mine—she’s papa’s,’ Pansy objected.

‘Miss Archer came to see you as well,’ said Madame Merle.

‘I’m very happy to hear that. She has been very polite to me.’

‘Do you like her then?’ the Countess asked.

‘She’s charming—charming,’ Pansy repeated in her little neat conversational tone. ‘She pleases me thoroughly.’

‘And how do you think she pleases your father?’

‘Ah really, Countess!’ murmured Madame Merle dissuasively. ‘Go and call them to tea,’ she went on to the child.

‘You’ll see if they don’t like it!’ Pansy declared; and departed to summon the others, who had still lingered at the end of the terrace.

‘If Miss Archer’s to become her mother it’s surely interesting to know if the child likes her,’ said the

Countess.

'If your brother marries again it won't be for Pansy's sake,' Madame Merle replied. 'She'll soon be sixteen, and after that she'll begin to need a husband rather than a stepmother.'

'And will you provide the husband as well?'

'I shall certainly take an interest in her marrying fortunately. I imagine you'll do the same.'

'Indeed I shan't!' cried the Countess. 'Why should I, of all women, set such a price on a husband?'

'You didn't marry fortunately; that's what I'm speaking of. When I say a husband I mean a good one.'

'There are no good ones. Osmond won't be a good one.'

Madame Merle closed her eyes a moment. 'You're irritated just now; I don't know why,' she presently said. 'I don't think you'll really object either to your brother's or to your niece's marrying when the time comes for them to do so; and as regards Pansy I'm confident that we shall some day have the pleasure of looking for a husband for her together. Your large acquaintance will be a great help.'

'Yes, I'm irritated,' the Countess answered. 'You often irritate me. Your own coolness is fabulous. You're a strange woman.'

'It's much better that we should always act together,' Madame Merle went on.

'Do you mean that as a threat?' asked the Countess rising.

Madame Merle shook her head as for quiet amusement. 'No indeed, you've not my coolness!'

Isabel and Mr Osmond were now slowly coming toward them and Isabel had taken Pansy by the hand. 'Do you pretend to believe he'd make her happy?' the Countess demanded.

'If he should marry Miss Archer I suppose he'd behave like a gentleman.'

The Countess jerked herself into a succession of attitudes. 'Do you mean as most gentlemen behave? That would be much to be thankful for! Of course Osmond's a gentleman; his own sister needn't be reminded of that. But does he think he can marry any girl he happens to pick out? Osmond's a gentleman, of course; but I must say I've never, no, no, never, seen any one of Osmond's pretensions! What they're all founded on is more than I can say. I'm his own sister; I might be supposed to know. Who is he, if you please? What has he ever done? If there had been anything particularly grand in his origin—if he were made of some superior clay—I presume I should have got some inkling of it. If there had been any great honours or splendours in the family I should certainly have made the most of them: they would have been quite in my line. But there's nothing, nothing, nothing. One's parents were charming people of course; but so were yours, I've no doubt. Every one's a charming person now-a–days. Even I'm a charming person; don't laugh, it has literally been said. As for Osmond, he has always appeared to believe that he's descended from the gods.'

'You may say what you please,' said Madame Merle, who had listened to this quick outbreak none the less attentively, we may believe, because her eye wandered away from the speaker and her hands busied themselves with adjusting the knots of ribbon on her dress. 'You Osmonds are a fine race—your blood must flow from some very pure source. Your brother, like an intelligent man, has had the conviction of it if he has not had the proofs. You're modest about it, but you yourself are extremely distinguished. What do you say about your niece? The child's a little princess. Nevertheless,' Madame Merle added, 'it won't be an easy matter for Osmond to marry Miss Archer. Yet he can try.'

'I hope she'll refuse him. It will take him down a little.'

'We mustn't forget that he is one of the cleverest of men.'

'I've heard you say that before, but I haven't yet discovered what he has done.'

'What he has done? He has done nothing that has had to be undone. And he has known how to wait.'

'To wait for Miss Archer's money? How much of it is there?'

'That's not what I mean,' said Madame Merle. 'Miss Archer has seventy thousand pounds.'

'Well, it's a pity she's so charming,' the Countess declared. 'To be sacrificed, any girl would do. She needn't be superior.'

'If she weren't superior your brother would never look at her. He must have the best.'

'Yes,' returned the Countess as they went forward a little to meet the others, 'he's very hard to satisfy. That makes me tremble for her happiness!'

XXVI

GILBERT OSMOND came to see Isabel again; that is he came to Palazzo Crescentini. He had other friends there as well, and to Mrs Touchett and Madame Merle he was always impartially civil; but the former of these ladies noted the fact that in the course of a fortnight he called five times, and compared it with another fact that she found no difficulty in remembering. Two visits a year had hitherto constituted his regular tribute to Mrs Touchett's worth, and she had never observed him select for such visits those moments, of almost periodical recurrence, when Madame Merle was under her roof. It was not for Madame Merle that he came; these two were old friends and he never put himself out for her. He was not fond of Ralph—Ralph had told her so—and it was not supposable that Mr Osmond had suddenly taken a fancy to her son. Ralph was imperturbable—Ralph had a kind of loose-fitting urbanity that wrapped him about like an illmade overcoat, but of which he never divested himself; he thought Mr Osmond very good company and was willing at any time to look at him in the light of hospitality. But he didn't flatter himself that the desire to repair a past injustice was the motive of their visitor's calls; he read the situation more clearly. Isabel was the attraction, and in all conscience a sufficient one. Osmond was a critic, a student of the exquisite, and it was natural he should be curious of so rare an apparition. So when his mother observed to him that it was plain what Mr Osmond was thinking of, Ralph replied that he was quite of her opinion. Mrs Touchett had from far back found a place on her scant list for this gentleman, though wondering dimly by what art and what process—so negative and so wise as they were—he had everywhere effectively imposed himself.* As he had never been an importunate visitor he had had no chance to be offensive, and he was recommended to her by his appearance of being as well able to do without her as she was to do without him—a quality that always, oddly enough, affected her as providing ground for a relation with her. It gave her no satisfaction, however, to think that he had taken it into his head to marry her niece. Such an alliance, on Isabel's part, would have an air of almost morbid perversity. Mrs Touchett easily remembered that the girl had refused an English peer; and that a young lady with whom Lord Warburton had not successfully wrestled should content herself with an obscure American dilettante, a middle-aged widower with an uncanny child and an ambiguous income, this answered to nothing in Mrs Touchett's conception of success. She took, it will be observed, not the sentimental, but the political, view of matrimony—a view which has always had much to recommend it. 'I trust she won't have the folly to listen to him,' she said to her son; to which Ralph replied that Isabel's listening was one thing and Isabel's answering quite another. He knew she had listened to several parties, as his father would have said, but had made them listen in return; and he found much entertainment in the idea that in these few months of his knowing her he should observe a fresh suitor at her gate. She had wanted to see life, and fortune was serving her to her taste; a succession of fine gentlemen going down on their knees to her would do as well as anything else. Ralph looked forward to a fourth, a fifth, a tenth besieger; he had no conviction she would stop at a third. She would keep the gate ajar and open a parley; she would certainly not allow number three to come in. He expressed this view, somewhat after this fashion, to his mother, who looked at him as if he had been dancing a jig. He had such a fanciful, pictorial way of saying things that he might as well address her in the deaf-mute's alphabet.

'I don't think I know what you mean,' she said; 'you use too many figures of speech; I could never understand allegories. The two words in the language I most respect are Yes and No. If Isabel wants to marry Mr Osmond she'll do so in spite of all your comparisons. Let her alone to find a fine one herself for anything she undertakes. I know very little about the young man in America; I don't think she spends much of her time in thinking of him, and I suspect he has got tired of waiting for her. There's nothing in life to prevent her marrying Mr Osmond if she only looks at him in a certain way. That's all very well; no one approves more than I of one's pleasing one's self. But she takes her pleasure in such odd things; she's capable of marrying Mr Osmond for the beauty of his opinions or for his autograph of Michael Angelo. She wants to be disinterested: as if she were the only person who's in danger of not being so! Will *he* be so disinterested when he has the spending of her money? That was her idea before your father's death, and it has acquired new charms for her since. She ought to marry some one of whose disinterestedness she shall herself be sure; and there would be no such proof of that as his having a fortune of his own.'

'My dear mother, I'm not afraid,' Ralph answered. 'She's making fools of us all. She'll please herself, of course; but she'll do so by studying human nature at close quarters and yet retaining her liberty. She has started on an exploring expedition, and I don't think she'll change her course, at the outset, at a signal

from Gilbert Osmond. She may have slackened speed for an hour, but before we know it she'll be steaming away again. Excuse another metaphor.'

Mrs Touchett excused it perhaps, but was not so much reassured as to withhold from Madame Merle the expression of her fears. 'You who know everything,' she said, 'you must know this: whether that curious creature's really making love to my niece.'

'Gilbert Osmond?' Madame Merle widened her clear eyes and, with a full intelligence, 'Heaven help us,' she exclaimed, 'that's an idea!'

'Hadn't it occurred to you?'

'You make me feel an idiot, but I confess it hadn't. I wonder,' she added, 'if it has occurred to Isabel.'

'Oh, I shall now ask her,' said Mrs Touchett.

Madame Merle reflected. 'Don't put it into her head. The thing would be to ask Mr Osmond.'

'I can't do that,' said Mrs Touchett. 'I won't have him enquire of me—as he perfectly may with that air of his, given Isabel's situation—what business it is of mine.'

'I'll ask him myself,' Madame Merle bravely declared.

'But what business—for *him*—is it of yours?'

'It's being none whatever is just why I can afford to speak. It's so much less my business than any one's else that he can put me off with anything he chooses. But it will be by the way he does this that I shall know.'

'Pray let me hear then,' said Mrs Touchett, 'of the fruits of your penetration. If I can't speak to him, however, at least I can speak to Isabel.'

Her companion sounded at this the note of warning. 'Don't be too quick with her. Don't inflame her imagination.'

'I never did anything in my life to any one's imagination. But I'm always sure of her doing something —well, not of my kind.'

'No, you wouldn't like this,' Madame Merle observed without the point of interrogation.

'Why in the world should I, pray? Mr Osmond has nothing the least solid to offer.'

Again Madame Merle was silent while her thoughtful smile drew up her mouth even more charmingly than usual toward the left corner. 'Let us distinguish. Gilbert Osmond's certainly not the first comer. He's a man who in favourable conditions might very well make a great impression. He has made a great impression, to my knowledge, more than once.'

'Don't tell me about his probably quite cold-blooded love-affairs; they're nothing to me!' Mrs Touchett cried. 'What you say's precisely why I wish he would cease his visits. He has nothing in the world that I know of but a dozen or two of early masters and a more or less pert little daughter.'

'The early masters are now worth a good deal of money,' said Madame Merle, 'and the daughter's a very young and very innocent and very harmless person.'

'In other words she's an insipid little chit. Is that what you mean? Having no fortune she can't hope to marry as they marry here; so that Isabel will have to furnish her either with a maintenance or with a dowry.'

'Isabel probably wouldn't object to being kind to her. I think she likes the poor child.'

'Another reason then for Mr Osmond's stopping at home! Otherwise, a week hence, we shall have my niece arriving at the conviction that her mission in life's to prove that a stepmother may sacrifice herself —and that, to prove it, she must first become one.'

'She would make a charming stepmother,' smiled Madame Merle; 'but I quite agree with you that she had better not decide upon her mission too hastily. Changing the form of one's mission's almost as difficult as changing the shape of one's nose: there they are, each, in the middle of one's face and one's character—one has to begin too far back. But I'll investigate and report to you.'

All this went on quite over Isabel's head; she had no suspicions that her relations with Mr Osmond were being discussed. Madame Merle had said nothing to put her on her guard; she alluded no more pointedly to him than to the other gentlemen of Florence, native and foreign, who now arrived in considerable numbers to pay their respects to Miss Archer's aunt. Isabel thought him interesting—she came back to that; she liked so to think of him. She had carried away an image from her visit to his hill-top which her subsequent knowledge of him did nothing to efface and which put on for her a particular harmony with other supposed and divined things, histories within histories: the image of a quiet, clever, sensitive, distinguished man, strolling on a moss-grown terrace above the sweet Val d'Arno and holding

by the hand a little girl whose bell-like clearness gave a new grace to childhood. The picture had no flourishes, but she liked its lowness of tone and the atmosphere of summer twilight that pervaded it. It spoke of the kind of personal issue that touched her most nearly; of the choice between objects, subjects, contacts—what might she call them?—of a thin and those of a rich association; of a lonely, studious life in a lovely land; of an old sorrow that sometimes ached to-day; of a feeling of pride that was perhaps exaggerated, but that had an element of nobleness; of a care for beauty and perfection so natural and so cultivated together that the career appeared to stretch beneath it in the disposed vistas and with the ranges of steps and terraces and fountains of a formal Italian garden—allowing only for arid places freshened by the natural dews of a quaint half-anxious, half-helpless fatherhood. At Palazzo Crescentini Mr Osmond's manner remained the same; diffident at first—oh self-conscious beyond doubt! and full of the effort (visible only to a sympathetic eye) to overcome this disadvantage; an effort which usually resulted in a great deal of easy, lively, very positive, rather aggressive, always suggestive talk. Mr Osmond's talk was not injured by the indication of an eagerness to shine; Isabel found no difficulty in believing that a person was sincere who had so many of the signs of strong conviction—as for instance an explicit and graceful appreciation of anything that might be said on his own side of the question, said perhaps by Miss Archer in especial. What continued to please this young woman was that while he talked so for amusement he didn't talk, as she had heard people, for 'effect.' He uttered his ideas as if, odd as they often appeared, he were used to them and had lived with them; old polished knobs and heads and handles, of precious substance, that could be fitted if necessary to new walkingsticks—not switches plucked in destitution from the common tree and then too elegantly waved about. One day he brought his small daughter with him, and she rejoiced to renew acquaintance with the child, who, as she presented her forehead to be kissed by every member of the circle, reminded her vividly of an *ingénue* in a French play. Isabel had never seen a little person of this pattern; American girls were very different—different too were the maidens of England. Pansy was so formed and finished for her tiny place in the world, and yet in imagination, as one could see, so innocent and infantine. She sat on the sofa by Isabel; she wore a small grenadine mantle and a pair of the useful gloves that Madame Merle had given her—little grey gloves with a single button. She was like a sheet of blank paper—the ideal *jeune fille** of foreign fiction. Isabel hoped that so fair and smooth a page would be covered with an edifying text.

The Countess Gemini also came to call upon her, but the Countess was quite another affair. She was by no means a blank sheet; she had been written over in a variety of hands, and Mrs Touchett, who felt by no means honoured by her visit, pronounced that a number of unmistakeable blots were to be seen upon her surface. The Countess gave rise indeed to some discussion between the mistress of the house and the visitor from Rome, in which Madame Merle (who was not such a fool as to irritate people by always agreeing with them) availed herself felicitously enough of that large licence of dissent which her hostess permitted as freely as she practised it. Mrs Touchett had declared it a piece of audacity that this highly compromised character should have presented herself at such a time of day at the door of a house in which she was esteemed so little as she must long have known herself to be at Palazzo Crescentini. Isabel had been made acquainted with the estimate prevailing under that roof: it represented Mr Osmond's sister as a lady who had so mismanaged her improprieties that they had ceased to hang together at all—which was at the least what one asked of such matters—and had become the mere floating fragments of a wrecked renown, incommoding social circulation.* She had been married by her mother—a more administrative person, with an appreciation of foreign titles which the daughter, to do her justice, had probably by this time thrown off—to an Italian nobleman who had perhaps given her some excuse for attempting to quench the consciousness of outrage. The Countess, however, had consoled herself outrageously, and the list of her excuses had now lost itself in the labyrinth of her adventures. Mrs Touchett had never consented to receive her, though the Countess had made overtures of old. Florence was not an austere city; but, as Mrs Touchett said, she had to draw the line somewhere.

Madame Merle defended the luckless lady with a great deal of zeal and wit. She couldn't see why Mrs Touchett should make a scapegoat of a woman who had really done no harm, who had only done good in the wrong way. One must certainly draw the line, but while one was about it one should draw it straight: it was a very crooked chalk-mark that would exclude the Countess Gemini. In that case Mrs Touchett had better shut up her house; this perhaps would be the best course so long as she remained in Florence. One must be fair and not make arbitrary differences: the Countess had doubtless been imprudent, she had not been so clever as other women. She was a good creature, not clever at all; but since when had that been a ground of exclusion from the best society? For ever so long now one had heard nothing about her, and there could be no better proof of her having renounced the error of her ways than her desire to become a member of Mrs Touchett's circle. Isabel could contribute nothing to this interesting dispute, not even a patient attention; she contented herself with having given a friendly welcome to the unfortunate lady,

who, whatever her defects, had at least the merit of being Mr Osmond's sister. As she liked the brother Isabel thought it proper to try and like the sister: in spite of the growing complexity of things she was still capable of these primitive sequences. She had not received the happiest impression of the Countess on meeting her at the villa, but was thankful for an opportunity to repair the accident. Had not Mr Osmond remarked that she was a respectable person? To have proceeded from Gilbert Osmond this was a crude proposition, but Madame Merle bestowed upon it a certain improving polish. She told Isabel more about the poor Countess than Mr Osmond had done, and related the history of her marriage and its consequences. The Count was a member of an ancient Tuscan family, but of such small estate that he had been glad to accept Amy Osmond, in spite of the questionable beauty which had yet not hampered her career, with the modest dowry her mother was able to offer—a sum about equivalent to that which had already formed her brother's share of their patrimony. Count Gemini since then, however, had inherited money, and now they were well enough off, as Italians went, though Amy was horribly extravagant. The Count was a low-lived brute; he had given his wife every pretext. She had no children; she had lost three within a year of their birth. Her mother, who had bristled with pretensions to elegant learning and published descriptive poems and corresponded on Italian subjects with the English weekly journals, her mother had died three years after the Countess's marriage, the father, lost in the grey American dawn of the situation, but reputed originally rich and wild, having died much earlier. One could see this in Gilbert Osmond, Madame Merle held—see that he had been brought up by a woman; though, to do him justice, one would suppose it had been by a more sensible woman than the American Corinne,* as Mrs Osmond had liked to be called. She had brought her children to Italy after her husband's death, and Mrs Touchett remembered her during the year that followed her arrival. She thought her a horrible snob; but this was an irregularity of judgement on Mrs Touchett's part, for she, like Mrs Osmond, approved of political marriages. The Countess was very good company and not really the featherhead she seemed; all one had to do with her was to observe the simple condition of not believing a word she said. Madame Merle had always made the best of her for her brother's sake; he appreciated any kindness shown to Amy, because (if it had to be confessed for him) he rather felt she let down their common name. Naturally he couldn't like her style, her shrillness, her egotism, her violations of taste and above all of truth: she acted badly on his nerves, she was not *his* sort of woman. What was his sort of woman? Oh, the very opposite of the Countess, a woman to whom the truth should be habitually sacred. Isabel was unable to estimate the number of times her visitor had, in half an hour, profaned it: the Countess indeed had given her an impression of rather silly sincerity. She had talked almost exclusively about herself; how much she should like to know Miss Archer; how thankful she should be for a real friend; how base the people in Florence were; how tired she was of the place; how much she should like to live somewhere else—in Paris, in London, in Washington; how impossible it was to get anything nice to wear in Italy except a little old lace; how dear the world was growing everywhere; what a life of suffering and privation she had led. Madame Merle listened with interest to Isabel's account of this passage, but she had not needed it to feel exempt from anxiety. On the whole she was not afraid of the Countess, and she could afford to do what was altogether best—not to appear so.

Isabel had meanwhile another visitor, whom it was not, even behind her back, so easy a matter to patronise. Henrietta Stackpole, who had left Paris after Mrs Touchett's departure for San Remo and had worked her way down, as she said, through the cities of North Italy, reached the banks of the Arno about the middle of May. Madame Merle surveyed her with a single glance, took her in from head to foot, and after a pang of despair determined to endure her. She determined indeed to delight in her. She mightn't be inhaled as a rose, but she might be grasped as a nettle. Madame Merle genially squeezed her into insignificance, and Isabel felt that in foreseeing this liberality she had done justice to her friend's intelligence. Henrietta's arrival had been announced by Mr Bantling, who, coming down from Nice while she was at Venice, and expecting to find her in Florence, which she had not yet reached, called at Palazzo Crescentini to express his disappointment. Henrietta's own advent occurred two days later and produced in Mr Bantling an emotion amply accounted for by the fact that he had not seen her since the termination of the episode at Versailles. The humorous view of his situation was generally taken, but it was uttered only by Ralph Touchett, who, in the privacy of his own apartment, when Bantling smoked a cigar there, indulged in goodness knew what strong comedy on the subject of the all-judging one and her British backer. This gentleman took the joke in perfectly good part and candidly confessed that he regarded the affair as a positive intellectual adventure. He liked Miss Stackpole extremely; he thought she had a wonderful head on her shoulders, and found great comfort in the society of a woman who was not perpetually thinking about what would be said and how what she did, how what *they* did—and they had done things!—would look. Miss Stackpole never cared how anything looked, and, if she didn't care, pray why should he? But his curiosity had been roused; he wanted awfully to see if she ever *would* care. He

was prepared to go as far as she—he didn't see why he should break down first.

Henrietta showed no signs of breaking down. Her prospects had brightened on her leaving England, and she was now in the full enjoyment of her copious resources. She had indeed been obliged to sacrifice her hopes with regard to the inner life; the social question, on the Continent, bristled with difficulties even more numerous than those she had encountered in England. But on the Continent there was the outer life, which was palpable and visible at every turn, and more easily convertible to literary uses than the customs of those opaque islanders. Out of doors in foreign lands, as she ingeniously remarked, one seemed to see the right side of the tapestry; out of doors in England one seemed to see the wrong side, which gave one no notion of the figure. The admission costs her historian a pang, but Henrietta, despairing of more occult things, was now paying much attention to the outer life. She had been studying it for two months at Venice, from which city she sent to the *Interviewer* a conscientious account of the gondolas, the Piazza, the Bridge of Sighs, the pigeons and the young boatman who chanted Tasso.* The *Interviewer* was perhaps disappointed, but Henrietta was at least seeing Europe. Her present purpose was to get down to Rome before the malaria* should come on—she apparently supposed that it began on a fixed day; and with this design she was to spend at present but few days in Florence. Mr Bantling was to go with her to Rome, and she pointed out to Isabel that as he had been there before, as he was a military man and as he had had a classical education—he had been bred at Eton, where they study nothing but Latin and Whyte-Melville,* said Miss Stackpole—he would be a most useful companion in the city of the Caesars. At this juncture Ralph had the happy idea of proposing to Isabel that she also, under his own escort, should make a pilgrimage to Rome. She expected to pass a portion of the next winter there—that was very well; but meantime there was no harm in surveying the field. There were ten days left of the beautiful month of May—the most precious month of all to the true Rome lover. Isabel would become a Rome-lover; that was a foregone conclusion. She was provided with a trusty companion of her own sex, whose society, thanks to the fact of other calls on this lady's attention, would probably not be oppressive. Madame Merle would remain with Mrs Touchett; she had left Rome for the summer and wouldn't care to return. She professed herself delighted to be left at peace in Florence; she had locked up her apartment and sent her cook home to Palestrina. She urged Isabel, however, to assent to Ralph's proposal, and assured her that a good introduction to Rome was not a thing to be despised. Isabel in truth needed no urging, and the party of four arranged its little journey. Mrs Touchett, on this occasion, had resigned herself to the absence of a duenna; we have seen that she now inclined to the belief that her niece should stand alone. One of Isabel's preparations consisted of her seeing Gilbert Osmond before she started and mentioning her intention to him.

'I should like to be in Rome with you,' he commented. 'I should like to see you on that wonderful ground.'

She scarcely faltered. 'You might come then.'

'But you'll have a lot of people with you.'

'Ah,' Isabel admitted, 'of course I shall not be alone.'

For a moment he said nothing more. 'You'll like it,' he went on at last. They've spoiled it, but you'll rave about it.'

'Ought I to dislike it because, poor old dear—the Niobe of Nations,* you know—it has been spoiled?' she asked.

'No, I think not. It has been spoiled so often,' he smiled. 'If I were to go, what should I do with my little girl?'

'Can't you leave her at the villa?'

'I don't know that I like that—though there's a very good old woman who looks after her. I can't afford a governess.'

'Bring her with you then,' said Isabel promptly.

Mr Osmond looked grave. 'She has been in Rome all winter, at her convent; and she's too young to make journeys of pleasure.'

'You don't like bringing her forward?' Isabel enquired.

'No, I think young girls should be kept out of the world.'

'I was brought up on a different system.'

'You? Oh, with you it succeeded, because you—you were exceptional.'

'I don't see why,' said Isabel, who, however, was not sure there was not some truth in the speech.

Mr Osmond didn't explain; he simply went on: 'If I thought it would make her resemble you to join a

social group in Rome I'd take her there tomorrow.'

'Don't make her resemble me,' said Isabel. 'Keep her like herself.'

'I might send her to my sister,' Mr Osmond observed. He had almost the air of asking advice; he seemed to like to talk over his domestic matters with Miss Archer.

'Yes,' she concurred; 'I think that wouldn't do much towards making her resemble me!'

After she had left Florence Gilbert Osmond met Madame Merle at the Countess Gemini's. There were other people present; the Countess's drawing-room was usually well filled, and the talk had been general, but after a while Osmond left his place and came and sat on an ottoman half-behind, half-beside Madame Merle's chair: 'She wants me to go to Rome with her,' he remarked in a low voice.

'To go with her?'

'To be there while she's there. She proposed it.'

'I suppose you mean that you proposed it and she assented.'

'Of course I gave her a chance. But she's encouraging—she's very encouraging.'

'I rejoice to hear it—but don't cry victory too soon. Of course you'll go to Rome.'

'Ah,' said Osmond, 'it makes one work, this idea of yours!'

'Don't pretend you don't enjoy it—you're very ungrateful. You've not been so well occupied these many years.'

'The way you take it's beautiful,' said Osmond. 'I ought to be grateful for that.'

'Not too much so, however,' Madame Merle answered. She talked with her usual smile, leaning back in her chair and looking round the room. 'You've made a very good impression, and I've seen for myself that you've received one. You've not come to Mrs Touchett's seven times to oblige me.'

'The girl's not disagreeable,' Osmond quietly conceded.

Madame Merle dropped her eye on him a moment, during which her lips closed with a certain firmness. 'Is that all you can find to say about that fine creature?'

'All? Isn't it enough? Of how many people have you heard me say more?'

She made no answer to this, but still presented her talkative grace to the room. 'You're unfathomable,' she murmured at last. 'I'm frightened at the abyss into which I shall have cast her.'

He took it almost gaily. 'You can't draw back—you've gone too far.'

'Very good; but you must do the rest yourself.'

'I shall do it,' said Gilbert Osmond.

Madame Merle remained silent and he changed his place again; but when she rose to go he also took leave. Mrs Touchett's victoria was awaiting her guest in the court, and after he had helped his friend into it he stood there detaining her. 'You're very indiscreet,' she said rather wearily; 'you shouldn't have moved when I did.'

He had taken off his hat; he passed his hand over his forehead. 'I always forget; I'm out of the habit.'

'You're quite unfathomable,' she repeated, glancing up at the windows of the house, a modern structure in the new part of the town.

He paid no heed to this remark, but spoke in his own sense. 'She's really very charming. I've scarcely known any one more graceful.'

'It does me good to hear you say that. The better you like her the better for me.'

'I like her very much. She's all you described her, and into the bargain capable, I feel, of great devotion. She has only one fault.'

'What's that?'

'Too many ideas.'

'I warned you she was clever.'

'Fortunately they're very bad ones,' said Osmond.

'Why is that fortunate?'

'*Dame*, if they must be sacrificed!'

Madame Merle leaned back, looking straight before her; then she spoke to the coachman. But her friend again detained her. 'If I go to Rome what shall I do with Pansy?'

'I'll go and see her,' said Madame Merle.

XXVII

I MAY not attempt to report in its fulness our young woman's response to the deep appeal of Rome, to analyse her feelings as she trod the pavement of the Forum or to number her pulsations as she crossed the threshold of Saint Peter's. It is enough to say that her impression was such as might have been expected of a person of her freshness and her eagerness. She had always been fond of history, and here was history in the stones of the street and the atoms of the sunshine. She had an imagination that kindled at the mention of great deeds, and wherever she turned some great deed had been acted. These things strongly moved her, but moved her all inwardly. It seemed to her companions that she talked less than usual, and Ralph Touchett, when he appeared to be looking listlessly and awkwardly over her head, was really dropping on her an intensity of observation. By her own measure she was very happy; she would even have been willing to take these hours for the happiest she was ever to know. The sense of the terrible human past was heavy to her, but that of something altogether contemporary would suddenly give it wings that it could wave in the blue. Her consciousness was so mixed that she scarcely knew where the different parts of it would lead her, and she went about in a repressed ecstasy of contemplation, seeing often in the things she looked at a great deal more than was there, and yet not seeing many of the items enumerated in her Murray.* Rome, as Ralph said, confessed to the psychological moment. The herd of reëchoing tourists had departed and most of the solemn places had relapsed into solemnity. The sky was a blaze of blue, and the plash of the fountains in their mossy niches had lost its chill and doubled its music. On the corners of the warm, bright streets one stumbled on bundles of flowers. Our friends had gone one afternoon—it was the third of their stay—to look at the latest excavations in the Forum, these labours having been for some time previous largely extended. They had descended from the modern street to the level of the Sacred Way, along which they wandered with a reverence of step which was not the same on the part of each. Henrietta Stackpole was struck with the fact that ancient Rome had been paved a good deal like New York, and even found an analogy between the deep chariot-ruts traceable in the antique street and the overjangled iron grooves which express the intensity of American life. The sun had begun to sink, the air was a golden haze, and the long shadows of broken column and vague pedestal leaned across the field of ruin. Henrietta wandered away with Mr Bantling, whom it was apparently delightful to her to hear speak of Julius Caesar as a 'cheeky old boy,' and Ralph addressed such elucidations as he was prepared to offer to the attentive ear of our heroine. One of the humble archæologists who hover about the place had put himself at the disposal of the two, and repeated his lesson with a fluency which the decline of the season had done nothing to impair. A process of digging was on view in a remote corner of the Forum, and he presently remarked that if it should please the *signori* to go and watch it a little they might see something of interest. The proposal commended itself more to Ralph than to Isabel, weary with much wandering; so that she admonished her companion to satisfy his curiosity while she patiently awaited his return. The hour and the place were much to her taste —she should enjoy being briefly alone. Ralph accordingly went off with the cicerone while Isabel sat down on a prostrate column near the foundations of the Capitol. She wanted a short solitude, but she was not long to enjoy it. Keen as was her interest in the rugged relics of the Roman past that lay scattered about her and in which the corrosion of centuries had still left so much of individual life, her thoughts, after resting a while on these things, had wandered, by a concatenation of stages it might require some subtlety to trace, to regions and objects charged with a more active appeal. From the Roman past to Isabel Archer's future was a long stride, but her imagination had taken it in a single flight and now hovered in slow circles over the nearer and richer field. She was so absorbed in her thoughts, as she bent her eyes upon a row of cracked but not dislocated slabs covering the ground at her feet, that she had not heard the sound of approaching footsteps before a shadow was thrown across the line of her vision. She looked up and saw a gentleman—a gentleman who was not Ralph come back to say that the excavations were a bore. This personage was startled as she was startled; he stood there baring his head to her perceptibly pale surprise.

'Lord Warburton!' Isabel exclaimed as she rose.

'I had no idea it was you. I turned that corner and came upon you.'

She looked about her to explain. 'I'm alone, but my companions have just left me. My cousin's gone to look at the work over there.'

'Ah yes; I see.' And Lord Warburton's eyes wandered vaguely in the direction she had indicated. He

stood firmly before her now; he had recovered his balance and seemed to wish to show it, though very kindly. ‘Don’t let me disturb you,’ he went on, looking at her dejected pillar. ‘I’m afraid you’re tired.’

‘Yes, I’m rather tired.’ She hesitated a moment, but sat down again. ‘Don’t let me interrupt *you*,’ she added.

‘Oh dear, I’m quite alone, I’ve nothing on earth to do. I had no idea you were in Rome. I’ve just come from the East. I’m only passing through.’

‘You’ve been making a long journey,’* said Isabel, who had learned from Ralph that Lord Warburton was absent from England.

‘Yes, I came abroad for six months—soon after I saw you last. I’ve been in Turkey and Asia Minor; I came the other day from Athens.’ He managed not to be awkward, but he wasn’t easy, and after a longer look at the girl he came down to nature. ‘Do you wish me to leave you, or will you let me stay a little?’

She took it all humanely. ‘I don’t wish you to leave me, Lord Warburton; I’m very glad to see you.’

‘Thank you for saying that. May I sit down?’

The fluted shaft on which she had taken her seat would have afforded a resting-place to several persons, and there was plenty of room even for a highly-developed Englishman. This fine specimen of that great class seated himself near our young lady, and in the course of five minutes he had asked her several questions, taken rather at random and to which, as he put some of them twice over, he apparently somewhat missed catching the answer; had given her too some information about himself which was not wasted upon her calmer feminine sense. He repeated more than once that he had not expected to meet her, and it was evident that the encounter touched him in a way that would have made preparation advisable. He began abruptly to pass from the impunity of things to their solemnity, and from their being delightful to their being impossible. He was splendidly sunburnt; even his multitudinous beard had been burnished by the fire of Asia. He was dressed in the loose-fitting, heterogeneous garments in which the English traveller in foreign lands is wont to consult his comfort and affirm his nationality; and with his pleasant steady eyes, his bronzed complexion, fresh beneath its seasoning, his manly figure, his minimising manner and his general air of being a gentleman and an explorer, he was such a representative of the British race as need not in any clime have been disavowed by those who have a kindness for it. Isabel noted these things and was glad she had always liked him. He had kept, evidently in spite of shocks, every one of his merits—properties these partaking of the essence of great decent houses, as one might put it; resembling their innermost fixtures and ornaments, not subject to vulgar shifting and removable only by some whole break-up. They talked of the matters naturally in order; her uncle’s death, Ralph’s state of health, the way she had passed her winter, her visit to Rome, her return to Florence, her plans for the summer, the hotel she was staying at; and then of Lord Warburton’s own adventures, movements, intentions, impressions and present domicile. At last there was a silence, and it said so much more than either had said that it scarce needed his final words. ‘I’ve written to you several times.’

‘Written to me? I’ve never had your letters.’

‘I never sent them. I burned them up.’

‘Ah,’ laughed Isabel, ‘it was better that you should do that than I!’

‘I thought you wouldn’t care for them,’ he went on with a simplicity that touched her. ‘It seemed to me that after all I had no right to trouble you with letters.’

‘I should have been very glad to have news of you. You know how I hoped that—that—’ But she stopped; there would be such a flatness in the utterance of her thought.

‘I know what you’re going to say. You hoped we should always remain good friends.’ This formula, as Lord Warburton uttered it, was certainly flat enough; but then he was interested in making it appear so.

She found herself reduced simply to ‘Please don’t talk of all that’; a speech which hardly struck her as improvement on the other.

‘It’s a small consolation to allow me!’ her companion exclaimed with force.

‘I can’t pretend to console you,’ said the girl, who, all still as she sat there, threw herself back with a sort of inward triumph on the answer that had satisfied him so little six months before. He was pleasant, he was powerful, he was gallant; there was no better man than he. But her answer remained.

‘It’s very well you don’t try to console me; it wouldn’t be in your power,’ she heard him say through the medium of her strange elation.

‘I hoped we should meet again, because I had no fear you would attempt to make me feel I had wronged you. But when you do that—the pain’s greater than the pleasure.’ And she got up with a small

conscious majesty, looking for her companions.

'I don't want to make you feel that; of course I can't say that. I only just want you to know one or two things—in fairness to myself, as it were. I won't return to the subject again. I felt very strongly what I expressed to you last year; I couldn't think of anything else. I tried to forget—energetically, systematically. I tried to take an interest in somebody else. I tell you this because I want you to know I did my duty. I didn't succeed. It was for the same purpose I went abroad—as far away as possible. They say travelling distracts the mind, but it didn't distract mine. I've thought of you perpetually, ever since I last saw you. I'm exactly the same. I love you just as much, and everything I said to you then is just as true. This instant at which I speak to you shows me again exactly how, to my great misfortune, you just insuperably *charm* me. There—I can't say less. I don't mean, however, to insist; it's only for a moment. I may add that when I came upon you a few minutes since, without the smallest idea of seeing you, I was, upon my honour, in the very act of wishing I knew where you were.' He had recovered his self-control, and while he spoke it became complete. He might have been addressing a small committee—making all quietly and clearly a statement of importance; aided by an occasional look at a paper of notes concealed in his hat, which he had not again put on. And the committee, assuredly, would have felt the point proved.

'I've often thought of you, Lord Warburton,' Isabel answered. 'You may be sure I shall always do that.' And she added in a tone of which she tried to keep up the kindness and keep down the meaning: 'There's no harm in that on either side.'

They walked along together, and she was prompt to ask about his sisters and request him to let them know she had done so. He made for the moment no further reference to their great question, but dipped again into shallower and safer waters. But he wished to know when she was to leave Rome, and on her mentioning the limit of her stay declared he was glad it was still so distant.

'Why do you say that if you yourself are only passing through?' she enquired with some anxiety.

'Ah, when I said I was passing through I didn't mean that one would treat Rome as if it were Clapham Junction.* To pass through Rome is to stop a week or two.'

'Say frankly that you mean to stay as long as I do!'

His flushed smile, for a little, seemed to sound her. 'You won't like that. You're afraid you'll see too much of me.'

'It doesn't matter what I like. I certainly can't expect you to leave this delightful place on my account. But I confess I'm afraid of you.'

'Afraid I'll begin again? I promise to be very careful.'

They had gradually stopped and they stood a moment face to face. 'Poor Lord Warburton!' she said with a compassion intended to be good for both of them.

'Poor Lord Warburton indeed! But I'll be careful.'

'You may be unhappy, but you shall not make *me* so. That I can't allow.'

'If I believed I could make you unhappy I think I should try it.' At this she walked in advance and he also proceeded. 'I'll never say a word to displease you.'

'Very good. If you do, our friendship's at an end.'

'Perhaps some day—after a while—you'll give me leave.'

'Give you leave to make me unhappy?'

He hesitated. 'To tell you again—' But he checked himself. 'I'll keep it down. I'll keep it down always.'

Ralph Touchett had been joined in his visit to the excavation by Miss Stackpole and her attendant, and these three now emerged from among the mounds of earth and stone collected round the aperture and came into sight of Isabel and her companion. Poor Ralph hailed his friend with joy qualified by wonder, and Henrietta exclaimed in a high voice 'Gracious, there's that lord!' Ralph and his English neighbour greeted with the austerity with which, after long separations, English neighbours greet, and Miss Stackpole rested her large intellectual gaze upon the sunburnt traveller. But she soon established her relation to the crisis. 'I don't suppose you remember me, sir.'

'Indeed I do remember you,' said Lord Warburton. 'I asked you to come and see me, and you never came.'

'I don't go everywhere I'm asked,' Miss Stackpole answered coldly.

'Ah well, I won't ask you again,' laughed the master of Lockleigh.

'If you do I'll go; so be sure!'

Lord Warburton, for all his hilarity, seemed sure enough. Mr Bantling had stood by without claiming a recognition, but he now took occasion to nod to his lordship, who answered him with a friendly ‘Oh, you here, Bantling?’ and a hand-shake.

‘Well,’ said Henrietta, ‘I didn’t know you knew him!’

‘I guess you don’t know every one I know,’ Mr Bantling rejoined facetiously.

‘I thought that when an Englishman knew a lord he always told you.’

‘Ah, I’m afraid Bantling was ashamed of me,’ Lord Warburton laughed again. Isabel took pleasure in that note; she gave a small sigh of relief as they kept their course homeward.

The next day was Sunday; she spent her morning over two long letters—one to her sister Lily, the other to Madame Merle; but in neither of these epistles did she mention the fact that a rejected suitor had threatened her with another appeal. Of a Sunday afternoon all good Romans (and the best Romans are often the northern barbarians) follow the custom of going to vespers at Saint Peter’s; and it had been agreed among our friends that they would drive together to the great church. After lunch, an hour before the carriage came, Lord Warburton presented himself at the Hotel de Paris and paid a visit to the two ladies, Ralph Touchett and Mr Bantling having gone out together. The visitor seemed to have wished to give Isabel a proof of his intention to keep the promise made her the evening before; he was both discreet and frank—not even dumbly importunate or remotely intense. He thus left her to judge what a mere good friend he could be. He talked about his travels, about Persia, about Turkey, and when Miss Stackpole asked him whether it would ‘pay’ for her to visit those countries assured her they offered a great field to female enterprise. Isabel did him justice, but she wondered what his purpose was and what he expected to gain even by proving the superior strain of his sincerity. If he expected to melt her by showing what a good fellow he was, he might spare himself the trouble. She knew the superior strain of everything about him, and nothing he could now do was required to light the view. Moreover his being in Rome at all affected her as a complication of the wrong sort—she liked so complications of the right. Nevertheless, when, on bringing his call to a close, he said he too should be at Saint Peter’s and should look out for her and her friends, she was obliged to reply that he must follow his convenience.

In the church, as she strolled over its tesselated acres, he was the first person she encountered. She had not been one of the superior tourists who are ‘disappointed’ in Saint Peter’s and find it smaller than its fame; the first time she passed beneath the huge leathern curtain that strains and bangs at the entrance, the first time she found herself beneath the far-arching dome and saw the light drizzle down through the air thickened with incense and with the reflections of marble and gilt, of mosaic and bronze, her conception of greatness rose and dizzily rose. After this it never lacked space to soar. She gazed and wondered like a child or a peasant, she paid her silent tribute to the seated sublime.* Lord Warburton walked beside her and talked of Saint Sophia of Constantinople; she feared for instance that he would end by calling attention to his exemplary conduct. The service had not yet begun, but at Saint Peter’s there is much to observe, and as there is something almost profane in the vastness of the place, which seems meant as much for physical as for spiritual exercise, the different figures and groups, the mingled worshippers and spectators, may follow their various intentions without conflict or scandal. In that splendid immensity individual indiscretion carries but a short distance. Isabel and her companions, however, were guilty of none; for though Henrietta was obliged in candour to declare that Michael Angelo’s dome suffered by comparison with that of the Capitol at Washington, she addressed her protest chiefly to Mr Bantling’s ear and reserved it in its more accentuated form for the columns of the *Interviewer*. Isabel made the circuit of the church with his lordship, and as they drew near the choir on the left of the entrance the voices of the Pope’s singers were borne to them over the heads of the large number of persons clustered outside the doors. They paused a while on the skirts of this crowd, composed in equal measure of Roman cockneys and inquisitive strangers, and while they stood there the sacred concert went forward. Ralph, with Henrietta and Mr Bantling, was apparently within, where Isabel, looking beyond the dense group in front of her, saw the afternoon light, silvered by clouds of incense that seemed to mingle with the splendid chant, slope through the embossed recesses of high windows. After a while the singing stopped and then Lord Warburton seemed disposed to move off with her. Isabel could only accompany him; whereupon she found herself confronted with Gilbert Osmond, who appeared to have been standing at a short distance behind her. He now approached with all the forms—he appeared to have multiplied them on this occasion to suit the place.

‘So you decided to come?’ she said as she put out her hand.

‘Yes, I came last night and called this afternoon at your hotel. They told me you had come here, and I looked about for you.’

‘The others are inside,’ she decided to say.

‘I didn’t come for the others,’ he promptly returned.

She looked away; Lord Warburton was watching them; perhaps he had heard this. Suddenly she remembered it to be just what he had said to her the morning he came to Gardencourt to ask her to marry him. Mr Osmond’s words had brought the colour to her cheek, and this reminiscence had not the effect of dispelling it. She repaired any betrayal by mentioning to each companion the name of the other, and fortunately at this moment Mr Bantling emerged from the choir, cleaving the crowd with British valour and followed by Miss Stackpole and Ralph Touchett. I say fortunately, but this is perhaps a superficial view of the matter; since on perceiving the gentleman from Florence Ralph Touchett appeared to take the case as not committing him to joy. He didn’t hang back, however, from civility, and presently observed to Isabel, with due benevolence, that she would soon have all her friends about her. Miss Stackpole had met Mr Osmond in Florence, but she had already found occasion to say to Isabel that she liked him no better than her other admirers—than Mr Touchett and Lord Warburton, and even than little Mr Rosier in Paris. ‘I don’t know what it’s in you,’ she had been pleased to remark, ‘but for a nice girl you do attract the most unnatural people. Mr Goodwood’s the only one I’ve any respect for, and he’s just the one you don’t appreciate.’

‘What’s your opinion of Saint Peter’s?’ Mr Osmond was meanwhile enquiring of our young lady.

‘It’s very large and very bright,’ she contented herself with replying.

‘It’s too large; it makes one feel like an atom.’

‘Isn’t that the right way to feel in the greatest of human temples?’ she asked with rather a liking for her phrase.

‘I suppose it’s the right way to feel everywhere, when one *is* nobody. But I like it in a church as little as anywhere else.’

‘You ought indeed to be a Pope!’ Isabel exclaimed, remembering something he had referred to in Florence.

‘Ah, I should have enjoyed that!’ said Gilbert Osmond.

Lord Warburton meanwhile had joined Ralph Touchett, and the two strolled away together. ‘Who’s the fellow speaking to Miss Archer?’ his lordship demanded.

‘His name’s Gilbert Osmond—he lives in Florence,’ Ralph said.

‘What is he besides?’

‘Nothing at all. Oh yes, he’s an American; but one forgets that—he’s so little of one.’

‘Has he known Miss Archer long?’

‘Three or four weeks.’

‘Does she like him?’

‘She’s trying to find out.’

‘And will she?’

‘Find out—?’ Ralph asked.

‘Will she like him?’

‘Do you mean will she accept him?’

‘Yes,’ said Lord Warburton after an instant; ‘I suppose that’s what I horribly mean.’

‘Perhaps not if one does nothing to prevent it,’ Ralph replied.

His lordship stared a moment, but apprehended. ‘Then we must be perfectly quiet?’

‘As quiet as the grave. And only on the chance!’ Ralph added.

‘The chance she may?’

‘The chance she may not?’

Lord Warburton took this at first in silence, but he spoke again. ‘Is he awfully clever?’

‘Awfully,’ said Ralph.

His companion thought. ‘And what else?’

‘What more do you want?’ Ralph groaned.

‘Do you mean what more does *she*?’

Ralph took him by the arm to turn him: they had to rejoin the others. ‘She wants nothing that *we* can give her.’

‘Ah well, if she won’t have You—!’ said his lordship handsomely as they went.*

XXVIII*

ON the morrow, in the evening, Lord Warburton went again to see his friends at their hotel, and at this establishment he learned that they had gone to the opera. He drove to the opera with the idea of paying them a visit in their box after the easy Italian fashion; and when he had obtained his admittance—it was one of the secondary theatres—looked about the large, bare, ill-lighted house. An act had just terminated and he was at liberty to pursue his quest. After scanning two or three tiers of boxes he perceived in one of the largest of these receptacles a lady whom he easily recognised. Miss Archer was seated facing the stage and partly screened by the curtain of the box; and beside her, leaning back in his chair, was Mr Gilbert Osmond. They appeared to have the place to themselves, and Warburton supposed their companions had taken advantage of the recess to enjoy the relative coolness of the lobby. He stood a while with his eyes on the interesting pair; he asked himself if he should go up and interrupt the harmony. At last he judged that Isabel had seen him, and this accident determined him. There should be no marked holding off. He took his way to the upper regions and on the staircase met Ralph Touchett slowly descending, his hat at the inclination of ennui and his hands where they usually were.

'I saw you below a moment since and was going down to you. I feel lonely and want company,' was Ralph's greeting.

'You've some that's very good which you've yet deserted.'

'Do you mean my cousin? Oh, she has a visitor and doesn't want me. Then Miss Stackpole and Bantling have gone out to a café to eat an ice—Miss Stackpole delights in an ice. I didn't think *they* wanted me either. The opera's very bad; the women look like laundresses and sing like peacocks. I feel very low.'

'You had better go home,' Lord Warburton said without affectation.

'And leave my young lady in this sad place? Ah no, I must watch over her.'

'She seems to have plenty of friends.'

'Yes, that's why I must watch,' said Ralph with the same large mock-melancholy.

'If she doesn't want you it's probable she doesn't want me.'

'No, you're different. Go to the box and stay there while I walk about.'

Lord Warburton went to the box, where Isabel's welcome was as to a friend so honourably old that he vaguely asked himself what queer temporal province she was annexing. He exchanged greetings with Mr Osmond, to whom he had been introduced the day before and who, after he came in, sat blandly apart and silent, as if repudiating competence in the subjects of allusion now probable. It struck her second visitor that Miss Archer had, in operatic conditions, a radiance, even a slight exaltation; as she was, however, at all times a keenly-glancing, quickly-moving, completely animated young woman, he may have been mistaken on this point. Her talk with him moreover pointed to presence of mind; it expressed a kindness so ingenious and deliberate as to indicate that she was in undisturbed possession of her faculties. Poor Lord Warburton had moments of bewilderment. She had discouraged him, formally, as much as a woman could; what business had she then with such arts and such felicities, above all with such tones of reparation—preparation? Her voice had tricks of sweetness, but why play them on *him*? The others came back; the bare, familiar, trivial opera began again. The box was large, and there was room for him to remain if he would sit a little behind and in the dark. He did so for half an hour, while Mr Osmond remained in front, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, just behind Isabel. Lord Warburton heard nothing, and from his gloomy corner saw nothing but the clear profile of this young lady defined against the dim illumination of the house. When there was another interval no one moved. Mr Osmond talked to Isabel, and Lord Warburton kept his corner. He did so but for a short time, however; after which he got up and bade good-night to the ladies. Isabel said nothing to detain him, but it didn't prevent his being puzzled again. Why should she mark so one of his values—quite the wrong one—when she would have nothing to do with another, which was quite the right? He was angry with himself for being puzzled, and then angry for being angry. Verdi's music did little to comfort him, and he left the theatre and walked homeward, without knowing his way, through the tortuous, tragic streets of Rome, where heavier sorrows than his had been carried under the stars.

'What's the character of that gentleman?' Osmond asked of Isabel after he had retired.

'Irreproachable—don't you see it?'

‘He owns about half England; that’s his character,’ Henrietta remarked. ‘That’s what they call a free country!’

‘Ah, he’s a great proprietor? Happy man!’ said Gilbert Osmond.

‘Do you call that happiness—the ownership of wretched human beings?’ cried Miss Stackpole. ‘He owns his tenants and has thousands of them. It’s pleasant to own something, but inanimate objects are enough for me. I don’t insist on flesh and blood and minds and consciences.’

‘It seems to me you own a human being or two,’ Mr Bantling suggested jocosely. ‘I wonder if Warburton orders his tenants about as you do me.’

‘Lord Warburton’s a great radical,’ Isabel said. ‘He has very advanced opinions.’

‘He has very advanced stone walls. His park’s enclosed by a gigantic iron fence, some thirty miles round,’ Henrietta announced for the information of Mr Osmond. ‘I should like him to converse with a few of our Boston radicals.’

‘Don’t they approve of iron fences?’ asked Mr Bantling.

‘Only to shut up wicked conservatives. I always feel as if I were talking to *you* over something with a neat top-finish of broken glass.’

‘Do you know him well, this unreformed reformer?’ Osmond went on, questioning Isabel.

‘Well enough for all the use I have for him.’

‘And how much of a use is that?’

‘Well, I like to like him.’

‘“Liking to like”—why, it makes a passion!’ said Osmond.

‘No’—she considered—‘keep that for liking to *dis*like.’

‘Do you wish to provoke me then,’ Osmond laughed, ‘to a passion for *him*?’

She said nothing for a moment, but then met the light question with a disproportionate gravity. ‘No, Mr Osmond; I don’t think I should ever dare to provoke you. Lord Warburton, at any rate,’ she more easily added, ‘is a very nice man.’

‘Of great ability?’ her friend enquired.

‘Of excellent ability, and as good as he looks.’

‘As good as he’s good-looking do you mean? He’s very goodlooking. How detestably fortunate!—to be a great English magnate, to be clever and handsome into the bargain, and, by way of finishing off, to enjoy your high favour! That’s a man I could envy.’

Isabel considered him with interest. ‘You seem to me to be always envying some one. Yesterday it was the Pope; today it’s poor Lord Warburton.’

‘My envy’s not dangerous;* it wouldn’t hurt a mouse. I don’t want to destroy the people—I only want to *be* them. You see it would destroy only myself.’

‘You’d like to be the Pope?’ said Isabel.

‘I should love it—but I should have gone in for it earlier. But why’—Osmond reverted—‘do you speak of your friend as poor?’

‘Women—when they are very, very good—sometimes pity men after they’ve hurt them; that’s their great way of showing kindness,’ said Ralph, joining in the conversation for the first time and with a cynicism so transparently ingenious as to be virtually innocent.

‘Pray, have I hurt Lord Warburton?’ Isabel asked, raising her eyebrows as if the idea were perfectly fresh.

‘It serves him right if you have,’ said Henrietta while the curtain rose for the ballet.

Isabel saw no more of her attributive victim for the next twentyfour hours, but on the second day after the visit to the opera she encountered him in the gallery of the Capitol, where he stood before the lion of the collection, the statue of the Dying Gladiator.* She had come in with her companions, among whom, on this occasion again, Gilbert Osmond had his place, and the party, having ascended the staircase, entered the first and finest of the rooms. Lord Warburton addressed her alertly enough, but said in a moment that he was leaving the gallery. ‘And I’m leaving Rome,’ he added. ‘I must bid you good-bye.’ Isabel, inconsequently enough, was now sorry to hear it. This was perhaps because she had ceased to be afraid of his renewing his suit; she was thinking of something else. She was on the point of naming her regret, but she checked herself and simply wished him a happy journey; which made him look at her rather unlightedly. ‘I’m afraid you’ll think me very “volatile.” I told you the other day I wanted so much to stop.’

‘Oh no; you could easily change your mind.’

‘That’s what I have done.’

‘*Bon voyage* then.’

‘You’re in a great hurry to get rid of me,’ said his lordship quite dismally.

‘Not in the least. But I hate partings.’

‘You don’t care what I do,’ he went on pitifully.

Isabel looked at him a moment. ‘Ah,’ she said, ‘you’re not keeping your promise!’

He coloured like a boy of fifteen. ‘If I’m not, then it’s because I can’t; and that’s why I’m going.’

‘Good-bye then.’

‘Good-bye.’ He lingered still, however. ‘When shall I see you again?’

Isabel hesitated, but soon, as if she had had a happy inspiration: ‘Some day after you’re married.’

‘That will never be. It will be after you are.’

‘That will do as well,’ she smiled.

‘Yes, quite as well. Good-bye.’

They shook hands, and he left her alone in the glorious room, among the shining antique marbles. She sat down in the centre of the circle of these presences, regarding them vaguely, resting her eyes on their beautiful blank faces; listening, as it were, to their eternal silence. It is impossible, in Rome at least, to look long at a great company of Greek sculptures without feeling the effect of their noble quietude; which, as with a high door closed for the ceremony, slowly drops on the spirit the large white mantle of peace. I say in Rome especially, because the Roman air is an exquisite medium for such impressions. The golden sunshine mingles with them, the deep stillness of the past, so vivid yet, though it is nothing but a void full of names, seems to throw a solemn spell upon them. The blinds were partly closed in the windows of the Capitol, and a clear, warm shadow rested on the figures and made them more mildly human. Isabel sat there a long time, under the charm of their motionless grace, wondering to what, of their experience, their absent eyes were open, and how, to our ears, their alien lips would sound. The dark red walls of the room threw them into relief; the polished marble floor reflected their beauty. She had seen them all before, but her enjoyment repeated itself, and it was all the greater because she was glad again, for the time, to be alone. At last, however, her attention lapsed, drawn off by a deeper tide of life. An occasional tourist came in, stopped and stared a moment at the Dying Gladiator, and then passed out of the other door, creaking over the smooth pavement. At the end of half an hour Gilbert Osmond reappeared, apparently in advance of his companions. He strolled toward her slowly, with his hands behind him and his usual enquiring, yet not quite appealing smile. ‘I’m surprised to find you alone, I thought you had company.’

‘So I have—the best.’ And she glanced at the Antinous and the Faun.*

‘Do you call them better company than an English peer?’

‘Ah, my English peer left me some time ago.’ She got up, speaking with intention a little dryly.

Mr Osmond noted her dryness, which contributed for him to the interest of his question. ‘I’m afraid that what I heard the other evening is true: you’re rather cruel to that nobleman.’

Isabel looked a moment at the vanquished Gladiator. ‘It’s not true. I’m scrupulously kind.’

‘That’s exactly what I mean!’ Gilbert Osmond returned, and with such happy hilarity that his joke needs to be explained. We know that he was fond of originals, of rarities, of the superior and the exquisite; and now that he had seen Lord Warburton, whom he thought a very fine example of his race and order, he perceived a new attraction in the idea of taking to himself a young lady who had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice objects by declining so noble a hand. Gilbert Osmond had a high appreciation of this particular patriciate; not so much for its distinction, which he thought easily surpassable, as for its solid actuality. He had never forgiven his star for not appointing him to an English dukedom, and he could measure the unexpectedness of such conduct as Isabel’s. It would be proper that the woman he might marry should have done something of that sort.

XXIX

RALPH TOUCHETT, in talk with his excellent friend, had rather markedly qualified, as we know, his recognition of Gilbert Osmond's personal merits; but he might really have felt himself illiberal in the light of that gentleman's conduct during the rest of the visit to Rome. Osmond spent a portion of each day with Isabel and her companions, and ended by affecting them as the easiest of men to live with. Who wouldn't have seen that he could command, as it were, both tact and gaiety?—which perhaps was exactly why Ralph had made his old-time look of superficial sociability a reproach to him. Even Isabel's invidious kinsman was obliged to admit that he was just now a delightful associate. His good-humour was imperturbable, his knowledge of the right fact, his production of the right word, as convenient as the friendly flicker of a match for your cigarette. Clearly he was amused—as amused as a man could be who was so little ever surprised, and that made him almost applausive. It was not that his spirits were visibly high—he would never, in the concert of pleasure, touch the big drum by so much as a knuckle: he had a mortal dislike to the high, ragged note, to what he called random ravings. He thought Miss Archer sometimes of too precipitate a readiness. It was pity she had that fault, because if she had not had it she would really have had none; she would have been as smooth to his general need of her as handled ivory to the palm. If he was not personally loud, however, he was deep, and during these closing days of the Roman May he knew a complacency that matched with slow irregular walks under the pines of the Villa Borghese,* among the small sweet meadow-flowers and the mossy marbles. He was pleased with everything; he had never before been pleased with so many things at once. Old impressions, old enjoyments, renewed themselves; one evening, going home to his room at the inn, he wrote down a little sonnet to which he prefixed the title of 'Rome Revisited.' A day or two later he showed this piece of correct and ingenious verse to Isabel, explaining to her that it was an Italian fashion to commemorate the occasions of life by a tribute to the muse.

He took his pleasures in general singly; he was too often—he would have admitted that—too sorely aware of something wrong, something ugly; the fertilising dew of a conceivable felicity too seldom descended on his spirit. But at present he was happy—happier than he had perhaps ever been in his life, and the feeling had a large foundation. This was simply the sense of success—the most agreeable emotion of the human heart. Osmond had never had too much of it; in this respect he had the irritation of satiety, as he knew perfectly well and often reminded himself. 'Ah no, I've not been spoiled; certainly I've not been spoiled,' he used inwardly to repeat. 'If I do succeed before I die I shall thoroughly have earned it.' He was too apt to reason as if 'earning' this boon consisted above all of covertly aching for it and might be confined to that exercise. Absolutely void of it, also, his career had not been; he might indeed have suggested to a spectator here and there that he was resting on vague laurels. But his triumphs were, some of them, now too old; others had been too easy. The present one had been less arduous than might have been expected, but had been easy—that is had been rapid—only because he had made an altogether exceptional effort, a greater effort than he had believed it in him to make. The desire to have something or other to show for his 'parts'—to show somehow or other—had been the dream of his youth; but as the years went on the conditions attached to any marked proof of rarity had affected him more and more as gross and detestable; like the swallowing of mugs of beer to advertise what one could 'stand.' If an anonymous drawing on a museum wall had been conscious and watchful it might have known this peculiar pleasure of being at last and all of a sudden identified—as from the hand of a great master—by the so high and so unnoticed fact of style.* His 'style' was what the girl had discovered with a little help; and now, beside herself enjoying it, she should publish it to the world without his having any of the trouble. She should do the thing *for* him, and he would not have waited in vain.

Shortly before the time fixed in advance for her departure this young lady received from Mrs Touchett a telegram running as follows: 'Leave Florence 4th June for Bellaggio,* and take you if you have not other views. But can't wait if you dawdle in Rome.' The dawdling in Rome was very pleasant, but Isabel had different views, and she let her aunt know she would immediately join her. She told Gilbert Osmond that she had done so, and he replied that, spending many of his summers as well as his winters in Italy, he himself would loiter a little longer in the cool shadow of Saint Peter's. He would not return to Florence for ten days more, and in that time she would have started for Bellaggio. It might be months in this case before he should see her again. This exchange took place in the large decorated sitting-room occupied by our friends at the hotel; it was late in the evening, and Ralph Touchett was to take his cousin back to

Florence on the morrow. Osmond had found the girl alone; Miss Stackpole had contracted a friendship with a delightful American family on the fourth floor and had mounted the interminable staircase to pay them a visit. Henrietta contracted friendships, in travelling, with great freedom, and had formed in railway-carriages several that were among her most valued ties. Ralph was making arrangements for the morrow's journey, and Isabel sat alone in a wilderness of yellow upholstery. The chairs and sofas were orange; the walls and windows were draped in purple and gilt. The mirrors, the pictures had great flamboyant frames; the ceiling was deeply vaulted and painted over with naked muses and cherubs. For Osmond the place was ugly to distress; the false colours, the sham splendour were like vulgar, bragging, lying talk. Isabel had taken in hand a volume of Ampère,* presented, on their arrival in Rome, by Ralph; but though she held it in her lap with her finger vaguely kept in the place she was not impatient to pursue her study. A lamp covered with a drooping veil of pink tissue-paper burned on the table beside her and diffused a strange pale rosiness over the scene.

'You say you'll come back; but who knows?' Gilbert Osmond said. 'I think you're much more likely to start on your voyage round the world. You're under no obligation to come back; you can do exactly what you choose; you can roam through space.'

'Well, Italy's a part of space,' Isabel answered. 'I can take it on the way.'

'On the way round the world? No, don't do that. Don't put us in a parenthesis—give us a chapter to ourselves. I don't want to see you on your travels. I'd rather see you when they're over. I should like to see you when you're tired and satiated,' Osmond added in a moment. 'I shall prefer you in that state.'

Isabel, with her eyes bent, fingered the pages of M. Ampère. 'You turn things into ridicule without seeming to do it, though not, I think, without intending it. You've no respect for my travels—you think them ridiculous.'

'Where do you find that?'

She went on in the same tone, fretting the edge of her book with the paper-knife. 'You see my ignorance, my blunders, the way I wander about as if the world belonged to me, simply because—because it has been put into my power to do so. You don't think a woman ought to do that. You think it bold and ungraceful.'

'I think it beautiful,' said Osmond. 'You know my opinions—I've treated you to enough of them. Don't you remember my telling you that one ought to make one's life a work of art? You looked rather shocked at first; but then I told you that it was exactly what you seemed to me to be trying to do with your own.'

She looked up from her book. 'What you despise most in the world is bad, is stupid art.'

'Possibly. But yours seem to me very clear and very good.'

'If I were to go to Japan next winter you would laugh at me,' she went on.

Osmond gave a smile—a keen one, but not a laugh, for the tone of their conversation was not jocose. Isabel had in fact her solemnity; he had seen it before. 'You have an imagination that startles one!'

'That's exactly what I say. You think such an idea absurd.'

'I would give my little finger to go to Japan;* it's one of the countries I want most to see. Can't you believe that, with my taste for old lacquer?'

'I haven't a taste for old lacquer to excuse me,' said Isabel.

'You've a better excuse—the means of going. You're quite wrong in your theory that I laugh at you. I don't know what has put it into your head.'

'It wouldn't be remarkable if you did think it ridiculous that I should have the means to travel when you've not; for you know everything, and I know nothing.'

'The more reason why you should travel and learn,' smiled Osmond. 'Besides,' he added as if it were a point to be made, 'I don't know everything.'

Isabel was not struck with the oddity of his saying this gravely; she was thinking that the pleasantest incident of her life—so it pleased her to qualify these too few days in Rome, which she might musingly have likened to the figure of some small princess of one of the ages of dress overmuffled in a mantle of state and dragging a train that it took pages or historians to hold up—that this felicity was coming to an end. That most of the interest of the time had been owing to Mr Osmond was a reflexion she was not just now at pains to make; she had already done the point abundant justice. But she said to herself that if there were a danger they should never meet again, perhaps after all it would be as well. Happy things don't repeat themselves, and her adventure wore already the changed, the seaward face of some romantic island from which, after feasting on purple grapes, she was putting off while the breeze rose. She might come back to Italy and find him different—this strange man who pleased her just as he was; and it would

be better not to come than run the risk of that. But if she was not to come the greater the pity that the chapter was closed; she felt for a moment a pang that touched the source of tears. The sensation kept her silent, and Gilbert Osmond was silent too; he was looking at her. ‘Go everywhere,’ he said at last, in a low, kind voice; ‘do everything; get everything out of life. Be happy—be triumphant.’

‘What do you mean by being triumphant?’

‘Well, doing what you like.’

‘To triumph, then, it seems to me, is to fail! Doing all the vain things one likes is often very tiresome.’

‘Exactly,’ said Osmond with his quiet quickness. ‘As I intimated just now, you’ll be tired some day.’ He paused a moment and then he went on: ‘I don’t know whether I had better not wait till then for something I want to say to you.’

‘Ah, I can’t advise you without knowing what it is. But I’m horrid when I’m tired,’ Isabel added with due inconsequence.

‘I don’t believe that. You’re angry, sometimes—that I can believe, though I’ve never seen it. But I’m sure you’re never “cross.”’

‘Not even when I lose my temper?’

‘You don’t lose it—you find it, and that must be beautiful.’ Osmond spoke with a noble earnestness. ‘They must be great moments to see.’

‘If I could only find it now!’ Isabel nervously cried.

‘I’m not afraid; I should fold my arms and admire you. I’m speaking very seriously.’ He leaned forward, a hand on each knee; for some moments he bent his eyes on the floor. ‘What I wish to say to you,’ he went on at last, looking up, ‘is that I find I’m in love with you.’

She instantly rose. ‘Ah, keep that till I *am* tired!’

‘Tired of hearing it from others?’ He sat there raising his eyes to her. ‘No, you may heed it now or never, as you please. But after all I must say it now.’ She had turned away, but in the movement she had stopped herself and dropped her gaze upon him. The two remained a while in this situation, exchanging a long look—the large, conscious look of the critical hours of life. Then he got up and came near her, deeply respectful, as if he were afraid he had been too familiar. ‘I’m absolutely in love with you.’

He had repeated the announcement in a tone of almost impersonal discretion, like a man who expected very little from it but who spoke for his own needed relief. The tears came into her eyes: this time they obeyed the sharpness of the pang that suggested to her somehow the slipping of a fine bolt—backward, forward, she couldn’t have said which. The words he had uttered made him, as he stood there, beautiful and generous, invested him as with the golden air of early autumn; but, morally speaking, she retreated before them—facing him still—as she had retreated in the other cases before a like encounter. ‘Oh don’t say that, please,’ she answered with an intensity that expressed the dread of having, in this case too, to choose and decide. What made her dread great was precisely the force which, as it would seem, ought to have banished all dread—the sense of something within herself, deep down, that she supposed to be inspired and trustful passion. It was there like a large sum stored in a bank—which there was a terror in having to begin to spend. If she touched it, it would all come out.*

‘I haven’t the idea that it will matter much to you,’ said Osmond. ‘I’ve too little to offer you. What I have—it’s enough for me; but it’s not enough for you. I’ve neither fortune, nor fame, nor extrinsic advantages of any kind. So I offer nothing. I only tell you because I think it can’t offend you, and some day or other it may give you pleasure. It gives me pleasure, I assure you,’ he went on, standing there before her, considerately inclined to her, turning his hat, which he had taken up, slowly round with a movement which had all the decent tremor of awkwardness and none of its oddity, and presenting to her his firm, refined, slightly ravaged face. ‘It gives me no pain, because it’s perfectly simple. For me you’ll always be the most important woman in the world.’

Isabel looked at herself in this character—looked intently, thinking she filled it with a certain grace. But what she said was not an expression of any such complacency. ‘You don’t offend me; but you ought to remember that, without being offended, one may be incommoded, troubled.’ ‘Incommoded’: she heard herself saying that, and it struck her as a ridiculous word. But it was what stupidly came to her.

‘I remember perfectly. Of course you’re surprised and startled. But if it’s nothing but that, it will pass away. And it will perhaps leave something that I may not be ashamed of.’

‘I don’t know what it may leave. You see at all events that I’m not overwhelmed,’ said Isabel with rather a pale smile. ‘I’m not too troubled to think. And I think that I’m glad we’re separating—that I leave Rome to-morrow.’

‘Of course I don’t agree with you there.’

‘I don’t at all *know* you,’ she added abruptly; and then she coloured as she heard herself saying what she had said almost a year before to Lord Warburton.

‘If you were not going away you’d know me better.’

‘I shall do that some other time.’

‘I hope so. I’m very easy to know.’

‘No, no,’ she emphatically answered—‘there you’re not sincere. You’re not easy to know; no one could be less so.’

‘Well,’ he laughed, ‘I said that because I know myself. It may be a boast, but I do.’

‘Very likely; but you’re very wise.’

‘So are you, Miss Archer!’ Osmond exclaimed.

‘I don’t feel so just now. Still, I’m wise enough to think you had better go. Good-night.’

‘God bless you!’ said Gilbert Osmond, taking the hand which she failed to surrender. After which he added: ‘If we meet again you’ll find me as you leave me. If we don’t I shall be so all the same.’

‘Thank you very much. Good-bye.’

There was something quietly firm about Isabel’s visitor; he might go of his own movement, but wouldn’t be dismissed. ‘There’s one thing more. I haven’t asked anything of you—not even a thought in the future; you must do me that justice. But there’s a little service I should like to ask. I shall not return home for several days; Rome’s delightful, and it’s a good place for a man in my state of mind. Oh, I know you’re sorry to leave it; but you’re right to do what your aunt wishes.’

‘She doesn’t even wish it!’ Isabel broke out strangely.

Osmond was apparently on the point of saying something that would match these words, but he changed his mind and rejoined simply: ‘Ah well, it’s proper you should go with her, very proper. Do everything that’s proper; I go in for that. Excuse my being so patronising. You say you don’t know me, but when you do you’ll discover what a worship I have for propriety.’

‘You’re not conventional?’ Isabel gravely asked.

‘I like the way you utter that word! No, I’m not conventional: I’m convention itself. You don’t understand that?’ And he paused a moment, smiling. ‘I should like to explain it.’ Then with a sudden, quick, bright naturalness, ‘Do come back again,’ he pleaded. ‘There are so many things we might talk about.’

She stood there with lowered eyes. ‘What service did you speak of just now?’

‘Go and see my little daughter before you leave Florence. She’s alone at the villa; I decided not to send her to my sister, who hasn’t at all my ideas. Tell her she must love her poor father very much,’ said Gilbert Osmond gently.

‘It will be a great pleasure to me to go,’ Isabel answered. ‘I’ll tell her what you say. Once more good-bye.’

On this he took a rapid, respectful leave. When he had gone she stood a moment looking about her and seated herself slowly and with an air of deliberation. She sat there till her companions came back, with folded hands, gazing at the ugly carpet. Her agitation—for it had not diminished—was very still, very deep. What had happened was something that for a week past her imagination had been going forward to meet; but here, when it came, she stopped—that sublime principle somehow broke down. The working of this young lady’s spirit was strange, and I can only give it to you as I see it, not hoping to make it seem altogether natural. Her imagination, as I say, now hung back: there was a last vague space it couldn’t cross—a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet.

XXX

SHE returned on the morrow to Florence, under her cousin's escort, and Ralph Touchett, though usually restive under railway discipline, thought very well of the successive hours passed in the train that hurried his companion away from the city now distinguished by Gilbert Osmond's preference—hours that were to form the first stage in a larger scheme of travel. Miss Stackpole had remained behind; she was planning a little trip to Naples, to be carried out with Mr Bantling's aid. Isabel was to have three days in Florence before the 4th of June, the date of Mrs Touchett's departure, and she determined to devote the last of these to her promise to call on Pansy Osmond. Her plan, however, seemed for a moment likely to modify itself in deference to an idea of Madame Merle's. This lady was still at Casa Touchett; but she too was on the point of leaving Florence, her next station being an ancient castle in the mountains of Tuscany, the residence of a noble family of that country, whose acquaintance (she had known them, as she said, 'forever') seemed to Isabel, in the light of certain photographs of their immense crenellated dwelling which her friend was able to show her, a precious privilege. She mentioned to this fortunate woman that Mr Osmond had asked her to take a look at his daughter, but didn't mention that he had also made her a declaration of love.

'*Ah, comme cela se trouve!*'* Madame Merle exclaimed. 'I myself have been thinking it would be a kindness to pay the child a little visit before I go off.'

'We can go together then,' Isabel reasonably said: 'reasonably' because the proposal was not uttered in the spirit of enthusiasm. She had prefigured her small pilgrimage as made in solitude; she should like it better so. She was nevertheless prepared to sacrifice this mystic sentiment to her great consideration for her friend.

That personage finely meditated. 'After all, why should we both go; having, each of us, so much to do during these last hours?'

'Very good; I can easily go alone.'

'I don't know about your going alone—to the house of a handsome bachelor. He has been married—but so long ago!'

Isabel stared. 'When Mr Osmond's away what does it matter?'

'They don't know he's away, you see.'

'They? Whom do you mean?'

'Every one. But perhaps it doesn't signify.'

'If you were going why shouldn't I?' Isabel asked.

'Because I'm an old frump and you're a beautiful young woman.'

'Granting all that, you've not promised.'

'How much you think of your promises!' said the elder woman in mild mockery.

'I think a great deal of my promises. Does that surprise you?'

'You're right,' Madame Merle audibly reflected. 'I really think you wish to be kind to the child.'

'I wish very much to be kind to her.'

'Go and see her then; no one will be the wiser. And tell her I'd have come if you hadn't. Or rather,' Madame Merle added, '*don't* tell her. She won't care.'

As Isabel drove, in the publicity of an open vehicle, along the winding way which led to Mr Osmond's hill-top, she wondered what her friend had meant by no one's being the wiser. Once in a while, at large intervals, this lady, whose voyaging discretion, as a general thing, was rather of the open sea than of the risky channel, dropped a remark of ambiguous quality, struck a note that sounded false. What cared Isabel Archer for the vulgar judgements of obscure people? and did Madame Merle suppose that she was capable of doing a thing at all if it had to be sneakingly done? Of course not: she must have meant something else—something which in the press of the hours that preceded her departure she had not had time to explain. Isabel would return to this some day; there were sorts of things as to which she liked to be clear. She heard Pansy strumming at the piano in another place as she herself was ushered into Mr Osmond's drawing-room; the little girl was 'practising,' and Isabel was pleased to think she performed this duty with rigour. She immediately came in, smoothing down her frock, and did the honours of her father's house with a wide-eyed earnestness of courtesy. Isabel sat there half an hour, and Pansy rose to

the occasion as the small, winged fairy in the pantomime soars by the aid of the dissimulated wire—not chattering, but conversing, and showing the same respectful interest in Isabel's affairs that Isabel was so good to take in hers. Isabel wondered at her; she had never had so directly presented to her nose the white flower of cultivated sweetness. How well the child had been taught, said our admiring young woman; how prettily she had been directed and fashioned; and yet how simple, how natural, how innocent she had been kept! Isabel was fond, ever, of the question of character and quality, of sounding, as who should say, the deep personal mystery, and it had pleased her, up to this time, to be in doubt as to whether this tender slip were not really all-knowing. Was the extremity of her candour but the perfection of self-consciousness? Was it put on to please her father's visitor, or was it the direct expression of an unspotted nature? The hour that Isabel spent in Mr Osmond's beautiful empty, dusky rooms—the windows had been half-darkened, to keep out the heat, and here and there, through an easy crevice, the splendid summer day peeped in, lighting a gleam of faded colour or tarnished gilt in the rich gloom—her interview with the daughter of the house, I say, effectually settled this question. Pansy was really a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so; she had neither art, nor guile, nor temper, nor talent—only two or three small exquisite instincts: for knowing a friend, for avoiding a mistake, for taking care of an old toy or a new frock. Yet to be so tender was to be touching withal, and she could be felt as an easy victim of fate. She would have no will, no power to resist, no sense of her own importance; she would easily be mystified, easily crushed: her force would be all in knowing when and where to cling. She moved about the place with her visitor, who had asked leave to walk through the other rooms again, where Pansy gave her judgement on several works of art. She spoke of her prospects, her occupations, her father's intentions; she was not egotistical, but felt the propriety of supplying the information so distinguished a guest would naturally expect.

'Please tell me,' she said, 'did papa, in Rome, go to see Madame Catherine? He told me he would if he had time. Perhaps he had not time. Papa likes a great deal of time. He wished to speak about my education; it isn't finished yet, you know. I don't know what they can do with me more; but it appears it's far from finished. Papa told me one day he thought he would finish it himself; for the last year or two, at the convent, the masters that teach the tall girls are so very dear. Papa's not rich, and I should be very sorry if he were to pay much money for me, because I don't think I'm worth it. I don't learn quickly enough, and I have no memory. For what I'm told, yes—especially when it's pleasant; but not for what I learn in a book. There was a young girl who was my best friend, and they took her away from the convent, when she was fourteen, to make—how do you say it in English?—to make a *dot*.* You don't say it in English? I hope it isn't wrong; I only mean they wished to keep the money to marry her. I don't know whether it is for that that papa wishes to keep the money—to marry *me*. It costs so much to marry!' Pansy went on with a sigh; 'I think papa might make that economy. At any rate I'm too young to think about it yet, and I don't care for any gentleman; I mean for any but him. If he were not my papa I should like to marry him! I would rather be his daughter than the wife of—of some strange person. I miss him very much, but not so much as you might think, for I've been so much away from him. Papa has always been principally for holidays. I miss Madame Catherine almost more; but you must not tell him that. You shall not see him again? I'm very sorry, and he'll be sorry too. Of every-one who comes here I like you the best. That's not a great compliment, for there are not many people. It was very kind of you to come to-day—so far from your house; for I'm really as yet only a child. Oh, yes, I've only the occupations of a child. When did *you* give them up, the occupations of a child? I should like to know how old you are, but I don't know whether it's right to ask. At the convent they told us that we must never ask the age. I don't like to do anything that's not expected; it looks as if one had not been properly taught. I myself—I should never like to be taken by surprise. Papa left directions for everything. I go to bed very early. When the sun goes off that side I go into the garden. Papa left strict orders that I was not to get scorched. I always enjoy the view; the mountains are so graceful. In Rome, from the convent, we saw nothing but roofs and bell-towers. I practise three hours. I don't play very well. You play yourself? I wish very much you'd play something for me; papa has the idea that I should hear good music. Madame Merle has played for me several times; that's what I like best about Madame Merle; she has great facility. I shall never have facility. And I've no voice—just a small sound like the squeak of a slate-pencil making flourishes.'

Isabel gratified this respectful wish, drew off her gloves and sat down to the piano, while Pansy, standing beside her, watched her white hands move quickly over the keys. When she stopped she kissed the child good-bye, held her close, looked at her long. 'Be very good,' she said; 'give pleasure to your father.'

'I think that's what I live for,' Pansy answered. 'He has not much pleasure; he's rather a sad man.'

Isabel listened to this assertion with an interest which she felt it almost a torment to be obliged to conceal. It was her pride that obliged her, and a certain sense of decency; there were still other things in

her head which she felt a strong impulse, instantly checked, to say to Pansy about her father; there were things it would have given her pleasure to hear the child, to make the child, say. But she no sooner became conscious of these things than her imagination was hushed with horror at the idea of taking advantage of the little girl—it was of this she would have accused herself—and of exhaling into that air where he might still have a subtle sense for it any breath of her charmed state. She had come—she had come; but she had stayed only an hour. She rose quickly from the music-stool; even then, however, she lingered a moment, still holding her small companion, drawing the child's sweet slimness closer and looking down at her almost in envy. She was obliged to confess it to herself—she would have taken a passionate pleasure in talking of Gilbert Osmond to this innocent, diminutive creature who was so near him. But she said no other word; she only kissed Pansy once again. They went together through the vestibule, to the door that opened on the court; and there her young hostess stopped, looking rather wistfully beyond. 'I may go no further. I've promised papa not to pass this door.'

'You're right to obey him; he'll never ask you anything unreasonable.'

'I shall always obey him. But when will you come again?'

'Not for a long time, I'm afraid.'

'As soon as you can, I hope. I'm only a little girl,' said Pansy, 'but I shall always expect you.' And the small figure stood in the high, dark doorway, watching Isabel cross the clear, grey court and disappear into the brightness beyond the big *portone*,* which gave a wider dazzle as it opened.

XXXI

ISABEL came back to Florence, but only after several months; an interval sufficiently replete with incident. It is not, however, during this interval that we are closely concerned with her; our attention is engaged again on a certain day in the late spring-time, shortly after her return to Palazzo Crescentini and a year from the date of the incidents just narrated. She was alone on this occasion, in one of the smaller of the numerous rooms devoted by Mrs Touchett to social uses, and there was that in her expression and attitude which would have suggested that she was expecting a visitor. The tall window was open, and though its green shutters were partly drawn the bright air of the garden had come in through a broad interstice and filled the room with warmth and perfume. Our young woman stood near it for some time, her hands clasped behind her; she gazed abroad with the vagueness of unrest. Too troubled for attention she moved in a vain circle. Yet it could not be in her thought to catch a glimpse of her visitor before he should pass into the house, since the entrance to the palace was not through the garden, in which stillness and privacy always reigned. She wished rather to forestall his arrival by a process of conjecture, and to judge by the expression of her face this attempt gave her plenty to do. Grave she found herself, and positively more weighted, as by the experience of the lapse of the year she had spent in seeing the world. She had ranged, she would have said, through space and surveyed much of mankind, and was therefore now, in her own eyes, a very different person from the frivolous young woman from Albany who had begun to take the measure of Europe on the lawn at Gardencourt a couple of years before. She flattered herself she had harvested wisdom and learned a great deal more of life than this light-minded creature had even suspected. If her thoughts just now had inclined themselves to retrospect, instead of fluttering their wings nervously about the present, they would have evoked a multitude of interesting pictures. These pictures would have been both landscapes and figure-pieces; the latter, however, would have been the more numerous. With several of the images that might have been projected on such a field we are already acquainted. There would be for instance the conciliatory Lily, our heroine's sister and Edmund Ludlow's wife, who had come out from New York to spend five months with her relative. She had left her husband behind her, but had brought her children, to whom Isabel now played with equal munificence and tenderness the part of maiden-aunt. Mr Ludlow, toward the last, had been able to snatch a few weeks from his forensic triumphs and, crossing the ocean with extreme rapidity, had spent a month with the two ladies in Paris before taking his wife home. The little Ludlows had not yet, even from the American point of view, reached the proper tourist-age; so that while her sister was with her Isabel had confined her movements to a narrow circle. Lily and the babies had joined her in Switzerland in the month of July, and they had spent a summer of fine weather in an Alpine valley where the flowers were thick in the meadows and the shade of great chestnuts made a resting-place for such upward wanderings as might be undertaken by ladies and children on warm afternoons. They had afterwards reached the French capital, which was worshipped, and with costly ceremonies, by Lily, but thought of as noisily vacant by Isabel, who in these days made use of her memory of Rome as she might have done, in a hot and crowded room, of a phial of something pungent hidden in her handkerchief.

Mrs Ludlow sacrificed, as I say, to Paris, yet had doubts and wonderments not allayed at that altar; and after her husband had joined her found further chagrin in his failure to throw himself into these speculations. They all had Isabel for subject; but Edmund Ludlow, as he had always done before, declined to be surprised, or distressed, or mystified, or elated, at anything his sister-in–law might have done or have failed to do. Mrs Ludlow's mental motions were sufficiently various. At one moment she thought it would be so natural for that young woman to come home and take a house in New York—the Rossiters', for instance, which had an elegant conservatory and was just round the corner from her own; at another she couldn't conceal her surprise at the girl's not marrying some member of one of the great aristocracies. On the whole, as I have said, she had fallen from high communion with the probabilities. She had taken more satisfaction in Isabel's accession of fortune than if the money had been left to herself; it had seemed to her to offer just the proper setting for her sister's slightly meagre, but scarce the less eminent figure. Isabel had developed less, however, than Lily had thought likely—development, to Lily's understanding, being somehow mysteriously connected with morning-calls and eveningparties. Intellectually, doubtless, she had made immense strides; but she appeared to have achieved few of those social conquests of which Mrs Ludlow had expected to admire the trophies. Lily's conception of such achievements was extremely vague; but this was exactly what she had expected of Isabel—to give it form and body. Isabel could have

done as well as she had done in New York; and Mrs Ludlow appealed to her husband to know whether there was any privilege she enjoyed in Europe which the society of that city might not offer her. We know ourselves that Isabel had made conquests—whether inferior or not to those she might have effected in her native land it would be a delicate matter to decide; and it is not altogether with a feeling of complacency that I again mention that she had not rendered these honourable victories public. She had not told her sister the history of Lord Warburton, nor had she given her a hint of Mr Osmond's state of mind; and she had had no better reason for her silence than that she didn't wish to speak. It was more romantic to say nothing, and, drinking deep, in secret, of romance, she was as little disposed to ask poor Lily's advice as she would have been to close that rare volume forever. But Lily knew nothing of these discriminations, and could only pronounce her sister's career a strange anti-climax—an impression confirmed by the fact that Isabel's silence about Mr Osmond, for instance, was in direct proportion to the frequency with which he occupied her thoughts. As this happened very often it sometimes appeared to Mrs Ludlow that she had lost her courage. So uncanny a result of so exhilarating an incident as inheriting a fortune was of course perplexing to the cheerful Lily; it added to her general sense that Isabel was not at all like other people.

Our young lady's courage, however, might have been taken as reaching its height after her relations had gone home. She could imagine braver things than spending the winter in Paris—Paris had sides by which it so resembled New York, Paris was like smart, neat prose—and her close correspondence with Madame Merle did much to stimulate such flights. She had never had a keener sense of freedom, of the absolute boldness and wantonness of liberty, than when she turned away from the platform at the Euston Station on one of the last days of November, after the departure of the train that was to convey poor Lily, her husband and her children to their ship at Liverpool. It had been good for her to regale; she was very conscious of that; she was very observant, as we know, of what was good for her, and her effort was constantly to find something that was good enough. To profit by the present advantage till the latest moment she had made the journey from Paris with the unenvied travellers. She would have accompanied them to Liverpool as well, only Edmund Ludlow had asked her, as a favour, not to do so; it made Lily so fidgety and she asked such impossible questions. Isabel watched the train move away; she kissed her hand to the elder of her small nephews, a demonstrative child who leaned dangerously far out of the window of the carriage and made separation an occasion of violent hilarity, and then she walked back into the foggy London street. The world lay before her—she could do whatever she chose.* There was a deep thrill in it all, but for the present her choice was tolerably discreet; she chose simply to walk back from Euston Square to her hotel. The early dusk of a November afternoon had already closed in; the street-lamps, in the thick, brown air, looked weak and red; our heroine was unattended and Euston Square was a long way from Piccadilly.* But Isabel performed the journey with a positive enjoyment of its dangers and lost her way almost on purpose, in order to get more sensations, so that she was disappointed when an obliging policeman easily set her right again. She was so fond of the spectacle of human life that she enjoyed even the aspect of gathering dusk in the London streets—the moving crowds, the hurrying cabs, the lighted shops, the flaring stalls, the dark, shining dampness of everything. That evening, at her hotel, she wrote to Madame Merle that she should start in a day or two for Rome. She made her way down to Rome without touching at Florence—having gone first to Venice and then proceeded southward by Ancona. She accomplished this journey without other assistance than that of her servant, for her natural protectors were not now on the ground. Ralph Touchett was spending the winter at Corfu, and Miss Stackpole, in the September previous, had been recalled to America by a telegram from the *Interviewer*. This journal offered its brilliant correspondent a fresher field for her genius than the mouldering cities of Europe, and Henrietta was cheered on her way by a promise from Mr Bantling that he would soon come over to see her. Isabel wrote to Mrs Touchett to apologise for not presenting herself just yet in Florence, and her aunt replied characteristically enough. Apologies, Mrs Touchett intimated, were of no more use to her than bubbles, and she herself never dealt in such articles. One either did the thing or one didn't, and what one 'would' have done belonged to the sphere of the irrelevant, like the idea of a future life or of the origin of things. Her letter was frank, but (a rare case with Mrs Touchett) not so frank as it pretended. She easily forgave her niece for not stopping at Florence, because she took it for a sign that Gilbert Osmond was less in question there than formerly. She watched of course to see if he would now find a pretext for going to Rome, and derived some comfort from learning that he had not been guilty of an absence.

Isabel, on her side, had not been a fortnight in Rome before she proposed to Madame Merle that they should make a little pilgrimage to the East. Madame Merle remarked that her friend was restless, but she added that she herself had always been consumed with the desire to visit Athens and Constantinople. The two ladies accordingly embarked on this expedition, and spent three months in Greece, in Turkey, in

Egypt. Isabel found much to interest her in these countries, though Madame Merle continued to remark that even among the most classic sites, the scenes most calculated to suggest repose and reflexion, a certain incoherence prevailed in her. Isabel travelled rapidly and recklessly; she was like a thirsty person draining cup after cup. Madame Merle meanwhile, as lady-in-waiting to a princess circulating *incognita*, panted a little in her rear. It was on Isabel's invitation she had come, and she imparted all due dignity to the girl's uncountenanced state. She played her part with the tact that might have been expected of her, effacing herself and accepting the position of a companion whose expenses were profusely paid. The situation, however, had no hardships, and people who met this reserved though striking pair on their travels would not have been able to tell you which was patroness and which client. To say that Madame Merle improved on acquaintance states meagrely the impression she made on her friend, who had found her from the first so ample and so easy. At the end of an intimacy of three months Isabel felt she knew her better; her character had revealed itself, and the admirable woman had also at last redeemed her promise of relating her history from her own point of view—a consummation the more desirable as Isabel had already heard it related from the point of view of others. This history was so sad a one (in so far as it concerned the late M. Merle, a positive adventurer, she might say, though originally so plausible, who had taken advantage, years before, of her youth and of an inexperience in which doubtless those who knew her only now would find it difficult to believe); it abounded so in startling and lamentable incidents that her companion wondered a person so *éprouvée** could have kept so much of her freshness, her interest in life. Into this freshness of Madame Merle's she obtained a considerable insight; she seemed to see it as professional, as slightly mechanical, carried about in its case like the fiddle of the virtuoso, or blanketed and bridled like the 'favourite' of the jockey. She liked her as much as ever, but there was a corner of the curtain that never was lifted; it was as if she had remained after all something of a public performer, condemned to emerge only in character and in costume. She had once said that she came from a distance, that she belonged to the 'old, old' world, and Isabel never lost the impression that she was the product of a different moral or social clime from her own, that she had grown up under other stars.

She believed then that at bottom she had a different morality. Of course the morality of civilised persons has always much in common; but our young woman had a sense in her of values gone wrong or, as they said at the shops, marked down. She considered, with the presumption of youth, that a morality differing from her own must be inferior to it; and this conviction was an aid to detecting an occasional flash of cruelty, an occasional lapse from candour, in the conversation of a person who had raised delicate kindness to an art and whose pride was too high for the narrow ways of deception. Her conception of human motives might, in certain lights, have been acquired at the court of some kingdom in decadence, and there were several in her list of which our heroine had not even heard. She had not heard of everything, that was very plain; and there were evidently things in the world of which it was not advantageous to hear. She had once or twice had a positive scare; since it so affected her to have to exclaim, of her friend, 'Heaven forgive her, she doesn't understand me!' Absurd as it may seem this discovery operated as a shock, left her with a vague dismay in which there was even an element of foreboding. The dismay of course subsided, in the light of some sudden proof of Madame Merle's remarkable intelligence; but it stood for a high-water–mark in the ebb and flow of confidence. Madame Merle had once declared her belief that when a friendship ceases to grow it immediately begins to decline—there being no point of equilibrium between liking more and liking less. A stationary affection, in other words, was impossible—it must move one way or the other. However that might be, the girl had in these days a thousand uses for her sense of the romantic, which was more active than it had ever been. I do not allude to the impulse it received as she gazed at the Pyramids in the course of an excursion from Cairo, or as she stood among the broken columns of the Acropolis and fixed her eyes upon the point designated to her as the Strait of Salamis; deep and memorable as these emotions had remained. She came back by the last of March from Egypt and Greece and made another stay in Rome. A few days after her arrival Gilbert Osmond descended from Florence and remained three weeks, during which the fact of her being with his old friend Madame Merle, in whose house she had gone to lodge, made it virtually inevitable that he should see her every day. When the last of April came she wrote to Mrs Touchett that she should now rejoice to accept an invitation given long before, and went to pay a visit at Palazzo Crescentini, Madame Merle on this occasion remaining in Rome. She found her aunt alone; her cousin was still at Corfu. Ralph, however, was expected in Florence from day to day, and Isabel, who had not seen him for upwards of a year, was prepared to give him the most affectionate welcome.

XXXII

IT was not of him, nevertheless, that she was thinking while she stood at the window near which we found her a while ago, and it was not of any of the matters I have rapidly sketched. She was not turned to the past, but to the immediate, impending hour. She had reason to expect a scene, and she was not fond of scenes. She was not asking herself what she should say to her visitor; this question had already been answered. What he would say to her—that was the interesting issue. It could be nothing in the least soothing—she had warrant for this, and the conviction doubtless showed in the cloud on her brow. For the rest, however, all clearness reigned in her; she had put away her mourning and she walked in no small shimmering splendour. She only felt older—ever so much, and as if she were 'worth more' for it, like some curious piece in an antiquary's collection. She was not at any rate left indefinitely to her apprehensions, for a servant at last stood before her with a card on his tray. 'Let the gentleman come in,' she said, and continued to gaze out of the window after the footman had retired. It was only when she had heard the door close behind the person who presently entered that she looked round.

Caspar Goodwood stood there—stood and received a moment, from head to foot, the bright, dry gaze with which she rather withheld than offered a greeting. Whether his sense of maturity had kept pace with Isabel's we shall perhaps presently ascertain; let me say meanwhile that to her critical glance he showed nothing of the injury of time. Straight, strong and hard, there was nothing in his appearance that spoke positively either of youth or of age; if he had neither innocence nor weakness, so he had no practical philosophy. His jaw showed the same voluntary cast as in earlier days; but a crisis like the present had in it of course something grim. He had the air of a man who had travelled hard; he said nothing at first, as if he had been out of breath. This gave Isabel time to make a reflexion: 'Poor fellow, what great things he's capable of, and what a pity he should waste so dreadfully his splendid force! What a pity too that one can't satisfy everybody!' It gave her time to do more—to say at the end of a minute: 'I can't tell you how I hoped you wouldn't come!'

'I've no doubt of that.' And he looked about him for a seat. Not only had he come, but he meant to settle.

'You must be very tired,' said Isabel, seating herself, and generously, as she thought, to give him his opportunity.

'No, I'm not at all tired. Did you ever know me to be tired?'

'Never; I wish I had! When did you arrive?'

'Last night, very late; in a kind of snail-train they call the express. These Italian trains go at about the rate of an American funeral.'

'That's in keeping—you must have felt as if you were coming to bury me!' And she forced a smile of encouragement to an easy view of their situation. She had reasoned the matter well out, making it perfectly clear that she broke no faith and falsified no contract; but for all this she was afraid of her visitor. She was ashamed of her fear; but she was devoutly thankful there was nothing else to be ashamed of. He looked at her with his stiff insistence, an insistence in which there was such a want of tact; especially when the dull dark beam in his eye rested on her as a physical weight.

'No, I didn't feel that; I couldn't think of you as dead. I wish I could!' he candidly declared.

'I thank you immensely.'

'I'd rather think of you as dead than as married to another man.'

'That's very selfish of you!' she returned with the ardour of a real conviction. 'If you're not happy yourself others have yet a right to be.'

'Very likely it's selfish; but I don't in the least mind your saying so. I don't mind anything you can say now—I don't feel it. The cruellest things you could think of would be mere pin-pricks. After what you've done I shall never feel anything—I mean anything but that. That I shall feel all my life.'

Mr Goodwood made these detached assertions with dry deliberateness, in his hard, slow American tone, which flung no atmospheric colour over propositions intrinsically crude. The tone made Isabel angry rather than touched her; but her anger perhaps was fortunate, inasmuch as it gave her a further reason for controlling herself. It was under the pressure of this control that she became, after a little, irrelevant. 'When did you leave New York?'

He threw up his head as if calculating. ‘Seventeen days ago.’

‘You must have travelled fast in spite of your slow trains.’

‘I came as fast as I could. I’d have come five days ago if I had been able.’

‘It wouldn’t have made any difference, Mr Goodwood,’ she coldly smiled.

‘Not to you—no. But to me.’

‘You gain nothing that I see.’

‘That’s for me to judge!’

‘Of course. To me it seems that you only torment yourself.’ And then, to change the subject, she asked him if he had seen Henrietta Stackpole. He looked as if he had not come from Boston to Florence to talk of Henrietta Stackpole; but he answered, distinctly enough, that this young lady had been with him just before he left America. ‘She came to see you?’ Isabel then demanded.

‘Yes, she was in Boston, and she called at my office. It was the day I had got your letter.’

‘Did you tell her?’ Isabel asked with a certain anxiety.

‘Oh no,’ said Caspar Goodwood simply; ‘I didn’t want to do that. She’ll hear it quick enough; she hears everything.’

‘I shall write to her, and then she’ll write to me and scold me,’ Isabel declared, trying to smile again.

Caspar, however, remained sternly grave. ‘I guess she’ll come right out,’ he said.

‘On purpose to scold me?’

‘I don’t know. She seemed to think she had not seen Europe thoroughly.’

‘I’m glad you tell me that,’ Isabel said. ‘I must prepare for her.’

Mr Goodwood fixed his eyes for a moment on the floor; then at last, raising them, ‘Does she know Mr Osmond?’ he enquired.

‘A little. And she doesn’t like him. But of course I don’t marry to please Henrietta,’ she added. It would have been better for poor Caspar if she had tried a little more to gratify Miss Stackpole; but he didn’t say so; he only asked, presently, when her marriage would take place. To which she made answer that she didn’t know yet. ‘I can only say it will be soon. I’ve told no one but yourself and one other person—an old friend of Mr Osmond’s.’

‘Is it a marriage your friends won’t like?’ he demanded.

‘I really haven’t an idea. As I say, I don’t marry for my friends.’

He went on, making no exclamation, no comment, only asking questions, doing it quite without delicacy. ‘Who and what then is Mr Gilbert Osmond?’

‘Who and what? Nobody and nothing but a very good and very honourable man. He’s not in business,’ said Isabel. ‘He’s not rich; he’s not known for anything in particular.’

She disliked Mr Goodwood’s questions, but she said to herself that she owed it to him to satisfy him as far as possible. The satisfaction poor Caspar exhibited was, however, small; he sat very upright, gazing at her. ‘Where does he come from? Where does he belong?’

She had never been so little pleased with the way he said ‘belawng.’ ‘He comes from nowhere. He has spent most of his life in Italy.’

‘You said in your letter he was American. Hasn’t he a native place?’

‘Yes, but he has forgotten it. He left it as a small boy.’

‘Has he never gone back?’

‘Why should he go back?’ Isabel asked, flushing all defensively. ‘He has no profession.’

‘He might have gone back for his pleasure. Doesn’t he like the United States?’

‘He doesn’t know them. Then he’s very quiet and very simple—he contents himself with Italy.’

‘With Italy and with you,’ said Mr Goodwood with gloomy plainness and no appearance of trying to make an epigram. ‘What has he ever done?’ he added abruptly.

‘That I should marry him? Nothing at all,’ Isabel replied while her patience helped itself by turning a little to hardness. ‘If he had done great things would you forgive me any better? Give me up, Mr Goodwood; I’m marrying a perfect nonentity. Don’t try to take an interest in him. You can’t.’

‘I can’t appreciate him; that’s what you mean. And you don’t mean in the least that he’s a perfect nonentity. You think he’s grand, you think he’s great, though no one else thinks so.’

Isabel’s colour deepened; she felt this really acute of her companion, and it was certainly a proof of the aid that passion might render perceptions she had never taken for fine. ‘Why do you always come

back to what others think? I can't discuss Mr Osmond with you.'

'Of course not,' said Caspar reasonably. And he sat there with his air of stiff helplessness, as if not only this were true, but there were nothing else that they might discuss.

'You see how little you gain,' she accordingly broke out—'how little comfort or satisfaction I can give you.'

'I didn't expect you to give me much.'

'I don't understand then why you came.'

'I came because I wanted to see you once more—even just as you are.'

'I appreciate that; but if you had waited a while, sooner or later we should have been sure to meet, and our meeting would have been pleasanter for each of us than this.'

'Waited till after you're married? That's just what I didn't want to do. You'll be different then.'

'Not very. I shall still be a great friend of yours. You'll see.'

'That will make it all the worse,' said Mr Goodwood grimly.

'Ah, you're unaccommodating! I can't promise to dislike you in order to help you to resign yourself.'

'I shouldn't care if you did!'

Isabel got up with a movement of repressed impatience and walked to the window, where she remained a moment looking out. When she turned round her visitor was still motionless in his place. She came toward him again and stopped, resting her hand on the back of the chair she had just quitted. 'Do you mean you came simply to look at me? That's better for you perhaps than for me.'

'I wished to hear the sound of your voice,' he said.

'You've heard it, and you see it says nothing very sweet.'

'It gives me pleasure, all the same.' And with this he got up.

She had felt pain and displeasure on receiving early that day the news he was in Florence and by her leave would come within an hour to see her. She had been vexed and distressed, though she had sent back word by his messenger that he might come when he would. She had not been better pleased when she saw him; his being there at all was so full of heavy implications. It implied things she could never assent to—rights, reproaches, remonstrance, rebuke, the expectation of making her change her purpose. These things, however, if implied, had not been expressed; and now our young lady, strangely enough, began to resent her visitor's remarkable self-control. There was a dumb misery about him that irritated her; there was a manly staying of his hand that made her heart beat faster. She felt her agitation rising, and she said to herself that she was angry in the way a woman is angry when she has been in the wrong. She was not in the wrong; she had fortunately not that bitterness to swallow; but, all the same, she wished he would denounce her a little. She had wished his visit would be short; it had no purpose, no propriety; yet now that he seemed to be turning away she felt a sudden horror of his leaving her without uttering a word that would give her an opportunity to defend herself more than she had done in writing to him a month before, in a few carefully chosen words, to announce her engagement. If she were not in the wrong, however, why should she desire to defend herself? It was an excess of generosity on Isabel's part to desire that Mr Goodwood should be angry. And if he had not meanwhile held himself hard it might have made him so to hear the tone in which she suddenly exclaimed, as if she were accusing him of having accused her: 'I've not deceived you! I was perfectly free!'

'Yes, I know that,' said Caspar.

'I gave you full warning that I'd do as I chose.'

'You said you'd probably never marry, and you said it with such a manner that I pretty well believed it.'

She considered this an instant. 'No one can be more surprised than myself at my present intention.'

'You told me that if I heard you were engaged I was not to believe it,' Caspar went on. 'I heard it twenty days ago from yourself, but I remembered what you had said. I thought there might be some mistake, and that's partly why I came.'

'If you wish me to repeat it by word of mouth, that's soon done. There's no mistake whatever.'

'I saw that as soon as I came into the room.'

'What good would it do you that I shouldn't marry?' she asked with a certain fierceness.

'I should like it better than this.'

'You're very selfish, as I said before.'

'I know that. I'm selfish as iron.'

‘Even iron sometimes melts! If you’ll be reasonable I’ll see you again.’

‘Don’t you call me reasonable now?’

‘I don’t know what to say to you,’ she answered with sudden humility.

‘I shan’t trouble you for a long time,’ the young man went on. He made a step towards the door, but he stopped. ‘Another reason why I came was that I wanted to hear what you would say in explanation of your having changed your mind.’

Her humbleness as suddenly deserted her. ‘In explanation? Do you think I’m bound to explain?’

He gave her one of his long dumb looks. ‘You were very positive. I did believe it.’

‘So did I. Do you think I could explain if I would?’

‘No, I suppose not. Well,’ he added, ‘I’ve done what I wished. I’ve seen you.’

‘How little you make of these terrible journeys,’ she felt the poverty of her presently replying.

‘If you’re afraid I’m knocked up—in any such way as that—you may be at your ease about it.’ He turned away, this time in earnest, and no hand-shake, no sign of parting, was exchanged between them. At the door he stopped with his hand on the knob. ‘I shall leave Florence to-morrow,’ he said without a quaver.

‘I’m delighted to hear it!’ she answered passionately. Five minutes after he had gone out she burst into tears.

XXXIII

HER fit of weeping, however, was soon smothered, and the signs of it had vanished when, an hour later, she broke the news to her aunt. I use this expression because she had been sure Mrs Touchett would not be pleased; Isabel had only waited to tell her till she had seen Mr Goodwood. She had an odd impression that it would not be honourable to make the fact public before she should have heard what Mr Goodwood would say about it. He had said rather less than she expected, and she now had a somewhat angry sense of having lost time. But she would lose no more; she waited till Mrs Touchett came into the drawing-room before the mid-day breakfast, and then she began. 'Aunt Lydia, I've something to tell you.'

Mrs Touchett gave a little jump and looked at her almost fiercely. 'You needn't tell me; I know what it is.'

'I don't know how you know.'

'The same way that I know when the window's open—by feeling a draught. You're going to marry that man.'

'What man do you mean?' Isabel enquired with great dignity.

'Madame Merle's friend—Mr Osmond.'

'I don't know why you call him Madame Merle's friend. Is that the principal thing he's known by?'

'If he's not her friend he ought to be—after what she has done for him!' cried Mrs Touchett. 'I shouldn't have expected it of her; I'm disappointed.'

'If you mean that Madame Merle has had anything to do with my engagement you're greatly mistaken,' Isabel declared with a sort of ardent coldness.

'You mean that your attractions were sufficient, without the gentleman's having had to be lashed up? You're quite right. They're immense, your attractions, and he would never have presumed to think of you if she hadn't put him up to it. He has a very good opinion of himself, but he was not a man to take trouble. Madame Merle took the trouble *for* him.'

'He has taken a great deal for himself!' cried Isabel with a voluntary laugh.

Mrs Touchett gave a sharp nod. 'I think he must, after all, to have made you like him so much.'

'I thought he even pleased *you*.'

'He did, at one time; and that's why I'm angry with him.'

'Be angry with me, not with him,' said the girl.

'Oh, I'm always angry with you; that's no satisfaction! Was it for this that you refused Lord Warburton?'

'Please don't go back to that. Why shouldn't I like Mr Osmond, since others have done so?'

'Others, at their wildest moments, never wanted to marry him. There's nothing *of* him,' Mrs Touchett explained.

'Then he can't hurt me,' said Isabel.

'Do you think you're going to be happy? No one's happy, in such doings, you should know.'

'I shall set the fashion then. What does one marry for?'

'What *you* will marry for, heaven only knows. People usually marry as they go into partnership—to set up a house. But in your partnership you'll bring everything.'

'Is it that Mr Osmond isn't rich? Is that what you're talking about?' Isabel asked.

'He has no money; he has no name; he has no importance. I value such things and I have the courage to say it; I think they're very precious. Many other people think the same, and they show it. But they give some other reason.'

Isabel hesitated a little. 'I think I value everything that's valuable. I care very much for money, and that's why I wish Mr Osmond to have a little.'

'Give it to him then; but marry some one else.'

'His name's good enough for me,' the girl went on. 'It's a very pretty name. Have I such a fine one myself?'

'All the more reason you should improve on it. There are only a dozen American names. Do you marry

him out of charity?'

'It was my duty to tell you, Aunt Lydia, but I don't think it's my duty to explain to you. Even if it were I shouldn't be able. So please don't remonstrate; in talking about it you have me at a disadvantage. I can't talk about it.'

'I don't remonstrate, I simply answer you: I must give some sign of intelligence. I saw it coming, and I said nothing. I never meddle.'

'You never do, and I'm greatly obliged to you. You've been very considerate.'

'It was not considerate—it was convenient,' said Mrs Touchett. 'But I shall talk to Madame Merle.'

'I don't see why you keep bringing her in. She has been a very good friend to me.'

'Possibly; but she has been a poor one to me.'

'What has she done to you?'

'She has deceived me. She had as good as promised me to prevent your engagement.'

'She couldn't have prevented it.'

'She can do anything; that's what I've always liked her for. I knew she could play any part; but I understood that she played them one by one. I didn't understand that she would play two at the same time.'

'I don't know what part she may have played to you,' Isabel said; 'that's between yourselves. To me she has been honest and kind and devoted.'

'Devoted, of course; she wished you to marry her candidate. She told me she was watching you only in order to interpose.'

'She said that to please you,' the girl answered; conscious, however, of the inadequacy of the explanation.

'To please me by deceiving me? She knows me better. Am I pleased to-day?'

'I don't think you're ever much pleased,' Isabel was obliged to reply. 'If Madame Merle knew you would learn the truth what had she to gain by insincerity?'

'She gained time, as you see. While I waited for her to interfere you were marching away, and she was really beating the drum.'

'That's very well. But by your own admission you saw I was marching, and even if she had given the alarm you wouldn't have tried to stop me.'

'No, but some one else would.'

'Whom do you mean?' Isabel asked, looking very hard at her aunt.

Mrs Touchett's little bright eyes, active as they usually were, sustained her gaze rather than returned it. 'Would you have listened to Ralph?'

'Not if he had abused Mr Osmond.'

'Ralph doesn't abuse people; you know that perfectly. He cares very much for you.'

'I know he does,' said Isabel; 'and I shall feel the value of it now, for he knows that whatever I do I do with reason.'

'He never believed you would do this. I told him you were capable of it, and he argued the other way.'

'He did it for the sake of argument,' the girl smiled. 'You don't accuse him of having deceived you; why should you accuse Madame Merle?'

'He never pretended he'd prevent it.'

'I'm glad of that!' cried Isabel gaily. 'I wish very much,' she presently added, 'that when he comes you'd tell him first of my engagement.'

'Of course I'll mention it,' said Mrs Touchett. 'I shall say nothing more to you about it, but I give you notice I shall talk to others.'

'That's as you please. I only meant that it's rather better the announcement should come from you than from me.'

'I quite agree with you; it's much more proper!' And on this the aunt and the niece went to breakfast, where Mrs Touchett, as good as her word, made no allusion to Gilbert Osmond. After an interval of silence, however, she asked her companion from whom she had received a visit an hour before.

'From an old friend—an American gentleman,' Isabel said with a colour in her cheek.

'An American gentleman of course. It's only an American gentleman who calls at ten o'clock in the morning.'

‘It was half-past ten; he was in a great hurry; he goes away this evening.’

‘Couldn’t he have come yesterday, at the usual time?’

‘He only arrived last night.’

‘He spends but twenty-four hours in Florence?’ Mrs Touchett cried. ‘He’s an American gentleman truly.’

‘He is indeed,’ said Isabel, thinking with perverse admiration of what Caspar Goodwood had done for her.

Two days afterward Ralph arrived; but though Isabel was sure that Mrs Touchett had lost no time in imparting to him the great fact, he showed at first no open knowledge of it. Their prompted talk was naturally of his health; Isabel had many questions to ask about Corfu. She had been shocked by his appearance when he came into the room; she had forgotten how ill he looked. In spite of Corfu he looked very ill to-day, and she wondered if he were really worse or if she were simply disaccustomed to living with an invalid. Poor Ralph made no nearer approach to conventional beauty as he advanced in life, and the now apparently complete loss of his health had done little to mitigate the natural oddity of his person. Blighted and battered, but still responsive and still ironic, his face was like a lighted lantern patched with paper and unsteadily held; his thin whisker languished upon a lean cheek; the exorbitant curve of his nose defined itself more sharply. Lean he was altogether, lean and long and loose-jointed; an accidental cohesion of relaxed angles. His brown velvet jacket had become perennial; his hands had fixed themselves in his pockets; he shambled and stumbled and shuffled in a manner that denoted great physical helplessness. It was perhaps this whimsical gait that helped to mark his character more than ever as that of the humorous invalid—the invalid for whom even his own disabilities are part of the general joke. They might well indeed with Ralph have been the chief cause of the want of seriousness marking his view of a world in which the reason for his own continued presence was past finding out. Isabel had grown fond of his ugliness; his awkwardness had become dear to her. They had been sweetened by association; they struck her as the very terms on which it had been given him to be charming. He was so charming that her sense of his being ill had hitherto had a sort of comfort in it; the state of his health had seemed not a limitation, but a kind of intellectual advantage; it absolved him from all professional and official emotions and left him the luxury of being exclusively personal. The personality so resulting was delightful; he had remained proof against the staleness of disease; he had had to consent to be deplorably ill, yet had somehow escaped being formally sick. Such had been the girl’s impression of her cousin; and when she had pitied him it was only on reflection. As she reflected a good deal she had allowed him a certain amount of compassion; but she always had a dread of wasting that essence—a precious article, worth more to the giver than to any one else. Now, however, it took no great sensibility to feel that poor Ralph’s tenure of life was less elastic than it should be. He was a bright, free, generous spirit, he had all the illumination of wisdom and none of its pedantry, and yet he was distressfully dying.

Isabel noted afresh that life was certainly hard for some people, and she felt a delicate glow of shame as she thought how easy it now promised to become for herself. She was prepared to learn that Ralph was not pleased with her engagement; but she was not prepared, in spite of her affection for him, to let this fact spoil the situation. She was not even prepared, or so she thought, to resent his want of sympathy; for it would be his privilege—it would be indeed his natural line—to find fault with any step she might take toward marriage. One’s cousin always pretended to hate one’s husband; that was traditional, classical; it was a part of one’s cousin’s always pretending to adore one. Ralph was nothing if not critical; and though she would certainly, other things being equal, have been as glad to marry to please him as to please any one, it would be absurd to regard as important that her choice should square with his views. What were his views after all? He had pretended to believe she had better have married Lord Warburton; but this was only because she had refused that excellent man. If she had accepted him Ralph would certainly have taken another tone; he always took the opposite. You could criticise any marriage; it was the essence of a marriage to be open to criticism. How well she herself, should she only give her mind to it, might criticise this union of her own! She had other employment, however, and Ralph was welcome to relieve her of the care. Isabel was prepared to be most patient and most indulgent. He must have seen that, and this made it the more odd he should say nothing. After three days had elapsed without his speaking our young woman wearied of waiting; dislike it as he would, he might at least go through the form. We, who know more about poor Ralph than his cousin, may easily believe that during the hours that followed his arrival at Palazzo Crescentini he had privately gone through many forms. His mother had literally greeted him with the great news, which had been even more sensibly chilling than Mrs Touchett’s maternal kiss. Ralph was shocked and humiliated; his calculations had been false and the person in the world in whom he was most interested was lost. He drifted about the house like a rudderless vessel in a rocky stream, or

sat in the garden of the palace on a great cane chair, his long legs extended, his head thrown back and his hat pulled over his eyes. He felt cold about the heart; he had never liked anything less. What could he do, what could he say? If the girl were irreclaimable could he pretend to like it? To attempt to reclaim her was permissible only if the attempt should succeed. To try to persuade her of anything sordid or sinister in the man to whose deep art she had succumbed would be decently discreet only in the event of her being persuaded. Otherwise he should simply have damned himself. It cost him an equal effort to speak his thought and to dissemble; he could neither assent with sincerity nor protest with hope. Meanwhile he knew—or rather he supposed—that the affianced pair were daily renewing their mutual vows. Osmond at this moment showed himself little at Palazzo Crescentini; but Isabel met him every day elsewhere, as she was free to do after their engagement had been made public. She had taken a carriage by the month, so as not to be indebted to her aunt for the means of pursuing a course of which Mrs Touchett disapproved, and she drove in the morning to the Cascine. This suburban wilderness, during the early hours, was void of all intruders, and our young lady, joined by her lover in its quietest part, strolled with him a while through the grey Italian shade and listened to the nightingales.

XXXIV

ONE morning, on her return from her drive, some half-hour before luncheon, she quitted her vehicle in the court of the palace and, instead of ascending the great staircase, crossed the court, passed beneath another archway and entered the garden. A sweeter spot at this moment could not have been imagined. The stillness of noontide hung over it, and the warm shade, enclosed and still, made bowers like spacious caves. Ralph was sitting there in the clear gloom, at the base of a statue of Terpsichore*—a dancing nymph with taper fingers and inflated draperies in the manner of Bernini;* the extreme relaxation of his attitude suggested at first to Isabel that he was asleep. Her light footstep on the grass had not roused him, and before turning away she stood for a moment looking at him. During this instant he opened his eyes; upon which she sat down on a rustic chair that matched with his own. Though in her irritation she had accused him of indifference she was not blind to the fact that he had visibly had something to brood over. But she had explained his air of absence partly by the languor of his increased weakness, partly by worries connected with the property inherited from his father—the fruit of eccentric arrangements of which Mrs Touchett disapproved and which, as she had told Isabel, now encountered opposition from the other partners in the bank. He ought to have gone to England, his mother said, instead of coming to Florence; he had not been there for months, and took no more interest in the bank than in the state of Patagonia.

'I'm sorry I waked you,' Isabel said; 'you look too tired.'

'I feel too tired. But I was not asleep. I was thinking of you.'

'Are you tired of that?'

'Very much so. It leads to nothing. The road's long and I never arrive.'

'What do you wish to arrive at?' she put to him, closing her parasol.

'At the point of expressing to myself properly what I think of your engagement.'

'Don't think too much of it,' she lightly returned.

'Do you mean that it's none of my business?'

'Beyond a certain point, yes.'

'That's the point I want to fix. I had an idea you may have found me wanting in good manners. I've never congratulated you.'

'Of course I've noticed that. I wondered why you were silent.'

'There have been a good many reasons. I'll tell you now,' Ralph said. He pulled off his hat and laid it on the ground; then he sat looking at her. He leaned back under the protection of Bernini, his head against his marble pedestal, his arms dropped on either side of him, his hands laid upon the rests of his wide chair. He looked awkward, uncomfortable; he hesitated long. Isabel said nothing; when people were embarrassed she was usually sorry for them, but she was determined not to help Ralph to utter a word that should not be to the honour of her high decision. 'I think I've hardly got over my surprise,' he went on at last. 'You were the last person I expected to see caught.'

'I don't know why you call it caught.'

'Because you're going to be put into a cage.'

'If I like my cage, that needn't trouble you,' she answered.

'That's what I wonder at; that's what I've been thinking of.'

'If you've been thinking you may imagine how I've thought! I'm satisfied that I'm doing well.'

'You must have changed immensely. A year ago you valued your liberty beyond everything. You wanted only to see life.'

'I've seen it,' said Isabel. 'It doesn't look to me now, I admit, such an inviting expanse.'

'I don't pretend it is; only I had an idea that you took a genial view of it and wanted to survey the whole field.'

'I've seen that one can't do anything so general. One must choose a corner and cultivate that.'

'That's what I think. And one must choose as good a corner as possible. I had an idea, all winter, while I read your delightful letters, that you were choosing. You said nothing about it, and your silence put me off my guard.'

‘It was not a matter I was likely to write to you about. Besides, I knew nothing of the future. It has all come lately. If you had been on your guard, however,’ Isabel asked, ‘what would you have done?’

‘I should have said “Wait a little longer.”’

‘Wait for what?’

‘Well, for a little more light,’ said Ralph with rather an absurd smile, while his hands found their way into his pockets.

‘Where should my light have come from? From you?’

‘I might have struck a spark or two.’

Isabel had drawn off her gloves; she smoothed them out as they lay upon her knee. The mildness of this movement was accidental, for her expression was not conciliatory. ‘You’re beating about the bush, Ralph. You wish to say you don’t like Mr Osmond, and yet you’re afraid.’

‘“Willing to wound and yet afraid to strike*”? I’m willing to wound *him*, yes—but not to wound you. I’m afraid of you, not of him. If you marry him it won’t be a fortunate way for me to have spoken.’

‘*If* I marry him! Have you had any expectation of dissuading me?’

‘Of course that seems to you too fatuous.’

‘No,’ said Isabel after a little; ‘it seems to me too touching.’

‘That’s the same thing. It makes me so ridiculous that you pity me.’

She stroked out her long gloves again. ‘I know you’ve a great affection for me. I can’t get rid of that.’

‘For heaven’s sake don’t try. Keep that well in sight. It will convince you how intensely I want you to do well.’

‘And how little you trust me!’

There was a moment’s silence; the warm noon-tide seemed to listen. ‘I trust you, but I don’t trust him,’ said Ralph.

She raised her eyes and gave him a wide, deep look. ‘You’ve said it now, and I’m glad you’ve made it so clear. But you’ll suffer by it.’

‘Not if you’re just.’

‘I’m very just,’ said Isabel. ‘What better proof of it can there be than that I’m not angry with you? I don’t know what’s the matter with me, but I’m not. I was when you began, but it has passed away. Perhaps I ought to be angry, but Mr Osmond wouldn’t think so. He wants me to know everything; that’s what I like him for. You’ve nothing to gain, I know that. I’ve never been so nice to you, as a girl, that you should have much reason for wishing me to remain one. You give very good advice; you’ve often done so. No, I’m very quiet; I’ve always believed in your wisdom,’ she went on, boasting of her quietness, yet speaking with a kind of contained exaltation. It was her passionate desire to be just; it touched Ralph to the heart, affected him like a caress from a creature he had injured. He wished to interrupt, to reassure her; for a moment he was absurdly inconsistent; he would have retracted what he had said. But she gave him no chance; she went on, having caught a glimpse, as she thought, of the heroic line and desiring to advance in that direction. ‘I see you’ve some special idea; I should like very much to hear it. I’m sure it’s disinterested; I feel that. It seems a strange thing to argue about, and of course I ought to tell you definitely that if you expect to dissuade me you may give it up. You’ll not move me an inch; it’s too late. As you say, I’m caught. Certainly it won’t be pleasant for you to remember this, but your pain will be in your own thoughts. I shall never reproach you.’

‘I don’t think you ever will,’ said Ralph. ‘It’s not in the least the sort of marriage I thought you’d make.’

‘What sort of marriage was that, pray?’

‘Well, I can hardly say. I hadn’t exactly a positive view of it, but I had a negative. I didn’t think you’d decide for—well, for *that* type.’

‘What’s the matter with Mr Osmond’s type, if it be one? His being so independent, so individual, is what I most see in him,’ the girl declared. ‘What do you know against him? You know him scarcely at all.’

‘Yes,’ Ralph said, ‘I know him very little, and I confess I haven’t facts and items to prove him a villain. But all the same I can’t help feeling that you’re running a grave risk.’

‘Marriage is always a grave risk, and his risk’s as grave as mine.’

‘That’s his affair! If he’s afraid, let him back out. I wish to God he would.’

Isabel reclined in her chair, folding her arms and gazing a while at her cousin. ‘I don’t think I understand you,’ she said at last coldly. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘I believed you’d marry a man of more importance.’

Cold, I say, her tone had been, but at this a colour like a flame leaped into her face. ‘Of more importance to whom? It seems to me enough that one’s husband should be of importance to one’s self!’

Ralph blushed as well; his attitude embarrassed him. Physically speaking he proceeded to change it; he straightened himself, then leaned forward, resting a hand on each knee. He fixed his eyes on the ground; he had an air of the most respectful deliberation. ‘I’ll tell you in a moment what I mean,’ he presently said. He felt agitated, intensely eager; now that he had opened the discussion he wished to discharge his mind. But he wished also to be superlatively gentle.

Isabel waited a little—then she went on with majesty. ‘In everything that makes one care for people Mr Osmond is pre-eminent. There may be nobler natures, but I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting one. Mr Osmond’s is the finest I know; he’s good enough for me, and interesting enough, and clever enough. I’m far more struck with what he has and what he represents than with what he may lack.’

‘I had treated myself to a charming vision of your future,’ Ralph observed without answering this: ‘I had amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you. There was to be nothing of this sort in it. You were not to come down so easily or so soon.’

‘Come down, you say?’

‘Well, that renders my sense of what has happened to you. You seemed to me to be soaring far up in the blue—to be, sailing in the bright light, over the heads of men. Suddenly some one tosses up a faded rosebud—a missile that should never have reached you—and straight you drop to the ground. It hurts me,’ said Ralph audaciously, ‘hurts me as if I had fallen myself!’

The look of pain and bewilderment deepened in his companion’s face. ‘I don’t understand you in the least,’ she repeated. ‘You say you amused yourself with a project for my career—I don’t understand that. Don’t amuse yourself too much, or I shall think you’re doing it at my expense.’

Ralph shook his head. ‘I’m not afraid of your not believing that I’ve had great ideas for you.’

‘What do you mean by my soaring and sailing?’ she pursued. ‘I’ve never moved on a higher plane than I’m moving on now. There’s nothing higher for a girl than to marry a—a person she likes,’ said poor Isabel, wandering into the didactic.

‘It’s your liking the person we speak of that I venture to criticise, my dear cousin. I should have said that the man for you would have been a more active, larger, freer sort of nature.’ Ralph hesitated, then added: ‘I can’t get over the sense that Osmond is somehow—well, small.’ He had uttered the last word with no great assurance; he was afraid she would flash out again. But to his surprise she was quiet; she had the air of considering.

‘Small?’ She made it sound immense.

‘I think he’s narrow, selfish. He takes himself so seriously!’

‘He has a great respect for himself; I don’t blame him for that,’ said Isabel. ‘It makes one more sure to respect others.’

Ralph for a moment felt almost reassured by her reasonable tone. ‘Yes, but everything is relative; one ought to feel one’s relation to things—to others. I don’t think Mr Osmond does that.’

‘I’ve chiefly to do with his relation to me. In that he’s excellent.’

‘He’s the incarnation of taste,’ Ralph went on, thinking hard how he could best express Gilbert Osmond’s sinister attributes without putting himself in the wrong by seeming to describe him coarsely. He wished to describe him impersonally, scientifically. ‘He judges and measures, approves and condemns, altogether by that.’

‘It’s a happy thing then that his taste should be exquisite.’

‘It’s exquisite, indeed, since it has led him to select you as his bride. But have you ever seen such a taste—a really exquisite one—ruffled?’

‘I hope it may never be my fortune to fail to gratify my husband’s.’

At these words a sudden passion leaped to Ralph’s lips. ‘Ah, that’s wilful, that’s unworthy of you! You were not meant to be measured in that way—you were meant for something better than to keep guard over the sensibilities of a sterile dilettante!’

Isabel rose quickly and he did the same, so that they stood for a moment looking at each other as if he had flung down a defiance or an insult. But ‘You go too far,’ she simply breathed.

‘I’ve said what I had on my mind—and I’ve said it because I love you!’

Isabel turned pale: was he too on that tiresome list? She had a sudden wish to strike him off. ‘Ah then,

you're not disinterested!'

'I love you, but I love without hope,' said Ralph quickly, forcing a smile and feeling that in that last declaration he had expressed more than he intended.

Isabel moved away and stood looking into the sunny stillness of the garden; but after a little she turned back to him. 'I'm afraid your talk then is the wildness of despair! I don't understand it—but it doesn't matter. I'm not arguing with you; it's impossible I should; I've only tried to listen to you. I'm much obliged to you for attempting to explain,' she said gently, as if the anger with which she had just sprung up had already subsided. 'It's very good of you to try to warn me, if you're really alarmed; but I won't promise to think of what you've said: I shall forget it as soon as possible. Try and forget it yourself; you've done your duty, and no man can do more. I can't explain to you what I feel, what I believe, and I wouldn't if I could.' She paused a moment and then went on with an inconsequence that Ralph observed even in the midst of his eagerness to discover some symptom of concession. 'I can't enter into your idea of Mr Osmond; I can't do it justice, because I see him in quite another way. He's not important—no, he's not important; he's a man to whom importance is supremely indifferent. If that's what you mean when you call him "small," then he's as small as you please. I call that large—it's the largest thing I know. I won't pretend to argue with you about a person I'm going to marry,' Isabel repeated. 'I'm not in the least concerned to defend Mr Osmond; he's not so weak as to need my defence. I should think it would seem strange even to yourself that I should talk of him so quietly and coldly, as if he were any one else. I wouldn't talk of him at all to any one but you; and you, after what you've said—I may just answer you once for all. Pray, would you wish me to make a mercenary marriage—what they call a marriage of ambition? I've only one ambition—to be free to follow out a good feeling. I had others once, but they've passed away. Do you complain of Mr Osmond because he's not rich? That's just what I like him for. I've fortunately money enough; I've never felt so thankful for it as to-day. There have been moments when I should like to go and kneel down by your father's grave: he did perhaps a better thing than he knew when he put it into my power to marry a poor man—a man who has borne his poverty with such dignity, with such indifference. Mr Osmond has never scrambled nor struggled—he has cared for no worldly praise. If that's to be narrow, if that's to be selfish, then it's very well. I'm not frightened by such words, I'm not even displeased; I'm only sorry that you should make a mistake. Others might have done so, but I'm surprised that *you* should. You might know a gentleman when you see one—you might know a fine mind. Mr Osmond makes no mistakes! He knows everything, he understands everything, he has the kindest, gentlest, highest spirit. You've got hold of some false idea. It's a pity, but I can't help it; it regards you more than me.' Isabel paused a moment, looking at her cousin with an eye illumined by a sentiment which contradicted the careful calmness of her manner—a mingled sentiment, to which the angry pain excited by his words and the wounded pride of having needed to justify a choice of which she felt only the nobleness and purity, equally contributed. Though she paused Ralph said nothing; he saw she had more to say. She was grand, but she was highly solicitous; she was indifferent, but she was all in a passion. 'What sort of a person should you have liked me to marry?' she asked suddenly. 'You talk about one's soaring and sailing, but if one marries at all one touches the earth. One has human feelings and needs, one has a heart in one's bosom, and one must marry a particular individual. Your mother has never forgiven me for not having come to a better understanding with Lord Warburton, and she's horrified at my contenting myself with a person who has none of his great advantages—no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort. It's the total absence of all these things that pleases me. Mr Osmond's simply a very lonely, a very cultivated and a very honest man—he's not a prodigious proprietor.'

Ralph had listened with great attention, as if everything she said merited deep consideration; but in truth he was only half thinking of the things she said, he was for the rest simply accommodating himself to the weight of his total impression—the impression of her ardent good faith. She was wrong, but she believed; she was deluded, but she was dismally consistent. It was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours. Ralph remembered what he had said to his father about wishing to put it into her power to meet the requirements of her imagination. He had done so, and the girl had taken full advantage of luxury. Poor Ralph felt sick; he felt ashamed. Isabel had uttered her last words with a low solemnity of conviction which virtually terminated the discussion, and she closed it formally by turning away and walking back to the house. Ralph walked beside her, and they passed into the court together and reached the big staircase. Here he stopped and Isabel paused, turning on him a face of elation—absolutely and perversely of gratitude. His opposition had made her own conception of her conduct clearer to her. 'Shall you not come up to breakfast?' she asked.

'No; I want no breakfast; I'm not hungry.'

‘You ought to eat,’ said the girl; ‘you live on air.’

‘I do, very much, and I shall go back into the garden and take another mouthful. I came thus far simply to say this. I told you last year that if you were to get into trouble I should feel terribly sold. That’s how I feel to-day.’

‘Do you think I’m in trouble?’

‘One’s in trouble when one’s in error.’

‘Very well,’ said Isabel; ‘I shall never complain of my trouble to you! And she moved up the staircase.

Ralph, standing there with his hands in his pockets, followed her with his eyes; then the lurking chill of the high-walled court struck him and made him shiver, so that he returned to the garden to breakfast on the Florentine sunshine.

XXXV

ISABEL, when she strolled in the Cascine with her lover, felt no impulse to tell him how little he was approved at Palazzo Crescentini. The discreet opposition offered to her marriage by her aunt and her cousin made on the whole no great impression upon her; the moral of it was simply that they disliked Gilbert Osmond. This dislike was not alarming to Isabel; she scarcely even regretted it; for it served mainly to throw into higher relief the fact, in every way so honourable, that she married to please herself. One did other things to please other people; one did this for a more personal satisfaction; and Isabel's satisfaction was confirmed by her lover's admirable good conduct. Gilbert Osmond was in love, and he had never deserved less than during these still, bright days, each of them numbered, which preceded the fulfilment of his hopes, the harsh criticism passed upon him by Ralph Touchett. The chief impression produced on Isabel's spirit by this criticism was that the passion of love separated its victim terribly from every one but the loved object. She felt herself disjoined from every one she had ever known before—from her two sisters, who wrote to express a dutiful hope that she would be happy, and a surprise, somewhat more vague, at her not having chosen a consort who was the hero of a richer accumulation of anecdote; from Henrietta, who, she was sure, would come out, too late, on purpose to remonstrate; from Lord Warburton, who would certainly console himself, and from Caspar Goodwood, who perhaps would not; from her aunt, who had cold, shallow ideas about marriage, for which she was not sorry to display her contempt; and from Ralph, whose talk about having great views for her was surely but a whimsical cover for a personal disappointment. Ralph apparently wished her not to marry at all—that was what it really meant—because he was amused with the spectacle of her adventures as a single woman. His disappointment made him say angry things about the man she had preferred even to him: Isabel flattered herself that she believed Ralph had been angry. It was the more easy for her to believe this because, as I say, she had now little free or unemployed emotion for minor needs, and accepted as an incident, in fact quite as an ornament, of her lot the idea that to prefer Gilbert Osmond as she preferred him was perforce to break all other ties. She tasted of the sweets of this preference, and they made her conscious, almost with awe, of the invidious and remorseless tide of the charmed and possessed condition, great as was the traditional honour and imputed virtue of being in love. It was the tragic part of happiness; one's right was always made of the wrong of some one else.

The elation of success, which surely now flamed high in Osmond, emitted meanwhile very little smoke for so brilliant a blaze. Contentment, on his part, took no vulgar form; excitement, in the most self-conscious of men, was a kind of ecstasy of self-control. This disposition, however, made him an admirable lover; it gave him a constant view of the smitten and dedicated state. He never forgot himself, as I say; and so he never forgot to be graceful and tender, to wear the appearance—which presented indeed no difficulty—of stirred senses and deep intentions. He was immensely pleased with his young lady; Madame Merle had made him a present of incalculable value. What could be a finer thing to live with than a high spirit attuned to softness? For would not the softness be all for one's self, and the strenuousness for society, which admired the air of superiority? What could be a happier gift in a companion than a quick, fanciful mind which saved one repetitions and reflected one's thought on a polished, elegant surface? Osmond hated to see his thought reproduced literally—that made it look stale and stupid; he preferred it to be freshened in the reproduction even as 'words' by music. His egotism had never taken the crude form of desiring a dull wife; this lady's intelligence was to be a silver plate, not an earthen one—a plate that he might heap up with ripe fruits, to which it would give a decorative value, so that talk might become for him a sort of served dessert. He found the silver quality in this perfection in Isabel; he could tap her imagination with his knuckle and make it ring. He knew perfectly, though he had not been told, that their union enjoyed little favour with the girl's relations; but he had always treated her so completely as an independent person that it hardly seemed necessary to express regret for the attitude of her family. Nevertheless, one morning, he made an abrupt allusion to it. 'It's the difference in our fortune they don't like,' he said. 'They think I'm in love with your money.'

'Are you speaking of my aunt—of my cousin?' Isabel asked. 'How do you know what they think?'

'You've not told me they're pleased, and when I wrote to Mrs Touchett the other day she never answered my note. If they had been delighted I should have had some sign of it, and the fact of my being poor and you rich is the most obvious explanation of their reserve. But of course when a poor man marries a rich girl he must be prepared for imputations. I don't mind them; I only care for one thing—for

your not having the shadow of a doubt. I don't care what people of whom I ask nothing think—I'm not even capable perhaps of wanting to know. I've never so concerned myself, God forgive me, and why should I begin to-day, when I have taken to myself a compensation for everything? I won't pretend I'm sorry you're rich; I'm delighted. I delight in everything that's yours—whether it be money or virtue. Money's a horrid thing to follow, but a charming thing to meet. It seems to me, however, that I've sufficiently proved the limits of my itch for it: I never in my life tried to earn a penny, and I ought to be less subject to suspicion than most of the people one sees grubbing and grabbing. I suppose it's their business to suspect—that of your family; it's proper on the whole they should. They'll like me better some day; so will you, for that matter. Meanwhile my business is not to make myself bad blood, but simply to be thankful for life and love.' 'It has made me better, loving you,' he said on another occasion; 'it has made me wiser and easier and—I won't pretend to deny—brighter and nicer and even stronger. I used to want a great many things before and to be angry I didn't have them. Theoretically I was satisfied, as I once told you. I flattered myself I had limited my wants. But I was subject to irritation; I used to have morbid, sterile, hateful fits of hunger, of desire. Now I'm really satisfied, because I can't think of anything better. It's just as when one has been trying to spell out a book in the twilight and suddenly the lamp comes in. I had been putting out my eyes over the book of life and finding nothing to reward me for my pains; but now that I can read it properly I see it's a delightful story. My dear girl, I can't tell you how life seems to stretch there before us—what a long summer afternoon awaits us. It's the latter half of an Italian day—with a golden haze, and the shadows just lengthening, and that divine delicacy in the light, the air, the landscape, which I have loved all my life and which you love to-day. Upon my honour, I don't see why we shouldn't get on. We've got what we like—to say nothing of having each other. We've the faculty of admiration and several capital convictions. We're not stupid, we're not mean, we're not under bonds to any kind of ignorance or dreariness. You're remarkably fresh, and I'm remarkably well-seasoned. We've my poor child to amuse us; we'll try and make up some little life for her. It's all soft and mellow—it has the Italian colouring.'

They made a good many plans, but they left themselves also a good deal of latitude; it was a matter of course, however, that they should live for the present in Italy. It was in Italy that they had met, Italy had been a party to their first impressions of each other, and Italy should be a party to their happiness. Osmond had the attachment of old acquaintance and Isabel the stimulus of new, which seemed to assure her a future at a high level of consciousness of the beautiful. The desire for unlimited expansion had been succeeded in her soul by the sense that life was vacant without some private duty that might gather one's energies to a point. She had told Ralph she had 'seen life' in a year or two and that she was already tired, not of the act of living, but of that of observing. What had become of all her ardours, her aspirations, her theories, her high estimate of her independence and her incipient conviction that she should never marry? These things had been absorbed in a more primitive need—a need the answer to which brushed away numberless questions, yet gratified infinite desires. It simplified the situation at a stroke, it came down from above like the light of the stars, and it needed no explanation. There was explanation enough in the fact that he was her lover, her own, and that she should be able to be of use to him. She could surrender to him with a kind of humility, she could marry him with a kind of pride; she was not only taking, she was giving.

He brought Pansy with him two or three times to the Cascine—Pansy who was very little taller than a year before, and not much older. That she would always be a child was the conviction expressed by her father, who held her by the hand when she was in her sixteenth year and told her to go and play while he sat down a little with the pretty lady. Pansy wore a short dress and a long coat; her hat always seemed too big for her. She found pleasure in walking off, with quick, short steps, to the end of the alley, and then in walking back with a smile that seemed an appeal for approbation. Isabel approved in abundance, and the abundance had the personal touch that the child's affectionate nature craved. She watched her indications as if for herself also much depended on them—Pansy already so represented part of the service she could render, part of the responsibility she could face. Her father took so the childish view of her that he had not yet explained to her the new relation in which he stood to the elegant Miss Archer. 'She doesn't know,' he said to Isabel; 'she doesn't guess; she thinks it perfectly natural that you and I should come and walk here together simply as good friends. There seems to me something enchantingly innocent in that; it's the way I like her to be. No, I'm not a failure, as I used to think; I've succeeded in two things. I'm to marry the woman I adore, and I've brought up my child, as I wished, in the old way.'

He was very fond, in all things, of the 'old way'; that had struck Isabel as one of his fine, quiet, sincere notes. 'It occurs to me that you'll not know whether you've succeeded until you've told her,' she said. 'You must see how she takes your news. She may be horrified—she may be jealous.'

'I'm not afraid of that; she's too fond of you on her own account. I should like to leave her in the dark

a little longer—to see if it will come into her head that if we're not engaged we ought to be.'

Isabel was impressed by Osmond's artistic, the plastic view, as it somehow appeared, of Pansy's innocence—her own appreciation of it being more anxiously moral. She was perhaps not the less pleased when he told her a few days later that he had communicated the fact to his daughter, who had made such a pretty little speech—'Oh, then I shall have a beautiful sister!' She was neither surprised nor alarmed; she had not cried, as he expected.

'Perhaps she had guessed it,' said Isabel.

'Don't say that; I should be disgusted if I believed that. I thought it would be just a little shock; but the way she took it proves that her good manners are paramount. That's also what I wished. You shall see for yourself; to-morrow she shall make you her congratulations in person.'

The meeting, on the morrow, took place at the Countess Gemini's, whither Pansy had been conducted by her father, who knew that Isabel was to come in the afternoon to return a visit made her by the Countess on learning that they were to become sisters-in–law. Calling at Casa Touchett the visitor had not found Isabel at home; but after our young woman had been ushered into the Countess's drawing-room Pansy arrived to say that her aunt would presently appear. Pansy was spending the day with that lady, who thought her of an age to begin to learn how to carry herself in company. It was Isabel's view that the little girl might have given lessons in deportment to her relative, and nothing could have justified this conviction more than the manner in which Pansy acquitted herself while they waited together for the Countess. Her father's decision, the year before, had finally been to send her back to the convent to receive the last graces, and Madame Catherine had evidently carried out her theory that Pansy was to be fitted for the great world.

'Papa has told me that you've kindly consented to marry him,' said this excellent woman's pupil. 'It's very delightful; I think you'll suit very well.'

'You think I shall suit *you*?'

'You'll suit me beautifully; but what I mean is that you and papa will suit each other. You're both so quiet and so serious. You're not so quiet as he—or even as Madame Merle; but you're more quiet than many others. He should not for instance have a wife like my aunt. She's always in motion, in agitation—to-day especially; you'll see when she comes in. They told us at the convent it was wrong to judge our elders, but I suppose there's no harm if we judge them favourably. You'll be a delightful companion for papa.'

'For you too, I hope,' Isabel said.

'I speak first of him on purpose. I've told you already what I myself think of you; I liked you from the first. I admire you so much that I think it will be a good fortune to have you always before me. You'll be my model; I shall try to imitate you though I'm afraid it will be very feeble. I'm very glad for papa—he needed something more than me. Without you I don't see how he could have got it. You'll be my stepmother, but we mustn't use that word. They're always said to be cruel; but I don't think you'll ever so much as pinch or even push me. I'm not afraid at all.'

'My good little Pansy,' said Isabel gently, 'I shall be ever so kind to you.' A vague, inconsequent vision of her coming in some odd way to need it had intervened with the effect of a chill.

'Very well then, I've nothing to fear,' the child returned with her note of prepared promptitude. What teaching she had had, it seemed to suggest—or what penalties for non-performance she dreaded!

Her description of her aunt had not been incorrect; the Countess Gemini was further than ever from having folded her wings. She entered the room with a flutter through the air and kissed Isabel first on the forehead and then on each cheek as if according to some ancient prescribed rite. She drew the visitor to a sofa and, looking at her with a variety of turns of the head, began to talk very much as if, seated brush in hand before an easel, she were applying a series of considered touches to a composition of figures already sketched in. 'If you expect me to congratulate you I must beg you to excuse me. I don't suppose you care if I do or not; I believe you're supposed not to care—through being so clever—for all sorts of ordinary things. But I care myself if I tell fibs; I never tell them unless there's something rather good to be gained. I don't see what's to be gained with you—especially as you wouldn't believe me. I don't make professions any more than I make paper flowers or flouncey lampshades—I don't know how. My lampshades would be sure to take fire, my roses and my fibs to be larger than life. I'm very glad for my own sake that you're to marry Osmond; but I won't pretend I'm glad for yours. You're very brilliant—you know that's the way you're always spoken of; you're an heiress and very good-looking and original, not *banal*; so it's a good thing to have you in the family. Our family's very good, you know; Osmond will have told you that; and my mother was rather distinguished—she was called the American Corinne. But we're dreadfully fallen, I

think, and perhaps you'll pick us up. I've great confidence in you; there are ever so many things I want to talk to you about. I never congratulate any girl on marrying; I think they ought to make it somehow not quite so awful a steel trap. I suppose Pansy oughtn't to hear all this; but that's what she has come to me for—to acquire the tone of society. There's no harm in her knowing what horrors she may be in for. When first I got an idea that my brother had designs on you I thought of writing to you, to recommend you, in the strongest terms, not to listen to him. Then I thought it would be disloyal, and I hate anything of that kind. Besides, as I say, I was enchanted for myself; and after all I'm very selfish. By the way, you won't respect me, not one little mite, and we shall never be intimate. I should like it, but you won't. Some day, all the same, we shall be better friends than you will believe at first. My husband will come and see you, though, as you probably know, he's on no sort of terms with Osmond. He's very fond of going to see pretty women, but I'm not afraid of you. In the first place I don't care what he does. In the second, you won't care a straw for him; he won't be a bit, at any time, your affair, and, stupid as he is, he'll see you're not his. Some day, if you can stand it, I'll tell you all about him. Do you think my niece ought to go out of the room? Pansy, go and practise a little in my boudoir.'

'Let her stay, please,' said Isabel. 'I would rather hear nothing that Pansy may not!'

XXXVI

ONE afternoon of the autumn of 1876, toward dusk, a young man of pleasing appearance rang at the door of a small apartment on the third floor of an old Roman house. On its being opened he enquired for Madame Merle; whereupon the servant, a neat, plain woman, with a French face and a lady's maid's manner, ushered him into a diminutive drawing-room and requested the favour of his name. 'Mr Edward Rosier,' said the young man, who sat down to wait till his hostess should appear.

The reader will perhaps not have forgotten that Mr Rosier was an ornament of the American circle in Paris, but it may also be remembered that he sometimes vanished from its horizon. He had spent a portion of several winters at Pau, and as he was a gentleman of constituted habits he might have continued for years to pay his annual visit to this charming resort. In the summer of 1876, however, an incident befell him which changed the current not only of his thoughts, but of his customary sequences. He passed a month in the Upper Engadine and encountered at Saint Moritz* a charming young girl. To this little person he began to pay, on the spot, particular attention: she struck him as exactly the household angel he had long been looking for. He was never precipitate, he was nothing if not discreet, so he forbore for the present to declare his passion; but it seemed to him when they parted—the young lady to go down into Italy and her admirer to proceed to Geneva, where he was under bonds to join other friends—that he should be romantically wretched if he were not to see her again. The simplest way to do so was to go in the autumn to Rome, where Miss Osmond was domiciled with her family. Mr Rosier started on his pilgrimage to the Italian capital and reached it on the first of November. It was a pleasant thing to do, but for the young man there was a strain of the heroic in the enterprise. He might expose himself, unseasoned, to the poison of the Roman air, which in November lay, notoriously, much in wait. Fortune, however, favours the brave; and this adventurer, who took three grains of quinine a day, had at the end of a month no cause to deplore his temerity. He had made to a certain extent good use of his time; he had devoted it in vain to finding a flaw in Pansy Osmond's composition. She was admirably finished; she had had the last touch; she was really a consummate piece. He thought of her in amorous meditation a good deal as he might have thought of a Dresden-china shepherdess. Miss Osmond, indeed, in the bloom of her juvenility, had a hint of the rococo* which Rosier, whose taste was predominantly for that manner, could not fail to appreciate. That he esteemed the productions of comparatively frivolous periods would have been apparent from the attention he bestowed upon Madame Merle's drawing-room, which, although furnished with specimens of every style, was especially rich in articles of the last two centuries. He had immediately put a glass into one eye and looked round; and then 'By Jove, she has some jolly good things!' he had yearningly murmured. The room was small and densely filled with furniture; it gave an impression of faded silk and little statuettes which might totter if one moved. Rosier got up and wandered about with his careful tread, bending over the tables charged with knick-knacks and the cushions embossed with princely arms. When Madame Merle came in she found him standing before the fireplace with his nose very close to the great lace flounce attached to the damask cover of the mantel. He had lifted it delicately, as if he were smelling it.

'It's old Venetian,' she said; 'it's rather good.'

'It's too good for this; you ought to wear it.'

'They tell me you have some better in Paris, in the same situation.'

'Ah, but I can't wear mine,' smiled the visitor.

'I don't see why you shouldn't! I've better lace than that to wear.'

His eyes wandered, lingeringly, round the room again. 'You've some very good things.'

'Yes, but I hate them.'

'Do you want to get rid of them?' the young man quickly asked.

'No, it's good to have something to hate: one works it off!'

'I love my things,' said Mr Rosier as he sat there flushed with all his recognitions. 'But it's not about them, nor about yours, that I came to talk to you.' He paused a moment and then, with greater softness: 'I care more for Miss Osmond than for all the *bibelots* in Europe!'

Madame Merle opened wide eyes. 'Did you come to tell me that?'

'I came to ask your advice.'

She looked at him with a friendly frown, stroking her chin with her large white hand. ‘A man in love, you know, doesn’t ask advice.’

‘Why not, if he’s in a difficult position? That’s often the case with a man in love. I’ve been in love before, and I know. But never so much as this time—really never so much. I should like particularly to know what you think of my prospects. I’m afraid that for Mr Osmond I’m not—well, a real collector’s piece.’

‘Do you wish me to intercede?’ Madame Merle asked with her fine arms folded and her handsome mouth drawn up to the left.

‘If you could say a good word for me I should be greatly obliged. There will be no use in my troubling Miss Osmond unless I have good reason to believe her father will consent.’

‘You’re very considerate; that’s in your favour. But you assume in rather an off-hand way that *I* think you a prize.’

‘You’ve been very kind to me,’ said the young man. ‘That’s why I came.’

‘I’m always kind to people who have good Louis Quatorze.* It’s very rare now, and there’s no telling what one may get by it.’ With which the left-hand corner of Madame Merle’s mouth gave expression to the joke.

But he looked, in spite of it, literally apprehensive and consistently strenuous. ‘Ah, I thought you liked me for myself!’

‘I like you very much; but, if you please, we won’t analyse. Pardon me if I seem patronising, but I think you a perfect little gentleman. I must tell you, however, that I’ve not the marrying of Pansy Osmond.’

‘I didn’t suppose that. But you’ve seemed to me intimate with her family, and I thought you might have influence.’

Madame Merle considered. ‘Whom do you call her family?’

‘Why, her father; and—how do you say it in English?—her *bellemère*.’*

‘Mr Osmond’s her father, certainly; but his wife can scarcely be termed a member of her family. Mrs Osmond has nothing to do with marrying her.’

‘I’m sorry for that,’ said Rosier with an amiable sigh of good faith. ‘I think Mrs Osmond would favour me.’

‘Very likely—if her husband doesn’t.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘Does she take the opposite line from him?’

‘In everything. They think quite differently.’

‘Well,’ said Rosier, ‘I’m sorry for that; but it’s none of my business. She’s very fond of Pansy.’

‘Yes, she’s very fond of Pansy.’

‘And Pansy has a great affection for her. She has told me how she loves her as if she were her own mother.’

‘You must, after all, have had some very intimate talk with the poor child,’ said Madame Merle. ‘Have you declared your sentiments?’

‘Never!’ cried Rosier, lifting his neatly-gloved hand. ‘Never till I’ve assured myself of those of the parents.’

‘You always wait for that? You’ve excellent principles; you observe the proprieties.’

‘I think you’re laughing at me,’ the young man murmured, dropping back in his chair and feeling his small moustache. ‘I didn’t expect that of you, Madame Merle.’

She shook her head calmly, like a person who saw things as she saw them. ‘You don’t do me justice. I think your conduct in excellent taste and the best you could adopt. Yes, that’s what I think.’

‘I wouldn’t agitate her—only to agitate her; I love her too much for that,’ said Ned Rosier.

‘I’m glad, after all, that you’ve told me,’ Madame Merle went on. ‘Leave it to me a little; I think I can help you.’

‘I said you were the person to come to!’ her visitor cried with prompt elation.

‘You were very clever,’ Madame Merle returned more dryly. ‘When I say I can help you I mean once assuming your cause to be good. Let us think a little if it is.’

‘I’m awfully decent, you know,’ said Rosier earnestly. ‘I won’t say I’ve no faults, but I’ll say I’ve no vices.’

‘All that’s negative, and it always depends, also, on what people call vices. What’s the positive side? What’s the virtuous? What have you got besides your Spanish lace and your Dresden teacups?’

‘I’ve a comfortable little fortune—about forty thousand francs a year. With the talent I have for arranging, we can live beautifully on such an income.’

‘Beautifully, no. Sufficiently, yes. Even that depends on where you live.’

‘Well, in Paris. I would undertake it in Paris.’

Madame Merle’s mouth rose to the left. ‘It wouldn’t be famous; you’d have to make use of the teacups, and they’d get broken.’

‘We don’t want to be famous. If Miss Osmond should have everything pretty it would be enough. When one’s as pretty as she one can afford—well, quite cheap *faience*.* She ought never to wear anything but muslin—without the sprig,’ said Rosier reflectively.

‘Wouldn’t you even allow her the sprig? She’d be much obliged to you at any rate for that theory.’

‘It’s the correct one, I assure you; and I’m sure she’d enter into it. She understands all that; that’s why I love her.’

‘She’s a very good little girl, and most tidy—also extremely graceful. But her father, to the best of my belief, can give her nothing.’

Rosier scarce demurred. ‘I don’t in the least desire that he should. But I may remark, all the same, that he lives like a rich man.’

‘The money’s his wife’s; she brought him a large fortune.’

‘Mrs Osmond then is very fond of her step-daughter; she may do something.’

‘For a love-sick swain you have your eyes about you!’ Madame Merle exclaimed with a laugh.

‘I esteem a *dot* very much. I can do without it, but I esteem it.’

‘Mrs Osmond,’ Madame Merle went on, ‘will probably prefer to keep her money for her own children.’

‘Her own children? Surely she has none.’

‘She may have yet. She had a poor little boy, who died two years ago, six months after his birth. Others therefore may come.’

‘I hope they will, if it will make her happy. She’s a splendid woman.’

Madame Merle failed to burst into speech. ‘Ah, about her there’s much to be said. Splendid as you like! We’ve not exactly made out that you’re a *parti*. The absence of vices is hardly a source of income.’

‘Pardon me, I think it may be,’ said Rosier quite lucidly.

‘You’ll be a touching couple, living on your innocence!’

‘I think you underrate me.’

‘You’re not so innocent as that? Seriously,’ said Madame Merle, ‘of course forty thousand francs a year and a nice character are a combination to be considered. I don’t say it’s to be jumped at, but there might be a worse offer. Mr Osmond, however, will probably incline to believe he can do better.’

‘*He* can do so perhaps; but what can his daughter do? She can’t do better than marry the man she loves. For she does, you know,’ Rosier added eagerly.

‘She does—I know it.’

‘Ah,’ cried the young man, ‘I said you were the person to come to.’

‘But I don’t know how *you* know it, if you haven’t asked her,’ Madame Merle went on.

‘In such a case there’s no need of asking and telling; as you say, we’re an innocent couple. How did *you* know it?’

‘I who am not innocent? By being very crafty. Leave it to me; I’ll find out for you.’

Rosier got up and stood smoothing his hat. ‘You say that rather coldly. Don’t simply find out how it is, but try to make it as it should be.’

‘I’ll do my best. I’ll try to make the most of your advantages.’

‘Thank you so very much. Meanwhile then I’ll say a word to Mrs Osmond.’

*‘Gardez-vous–en bien!’** And Madame Merle was on her feet. ‘Don’t set her going, or you’ll spoil everything.’

Rosier gazed into his hat; he wondered whether his hostess *had* been after all the right person to come to. ‘I don’t think I understand you. I’m an old friend of Mrs Osmond, and I think she would like me to succeed.’

‘Be an old friend as much as you like; the more old friends she has the better, for she doesn’t get on

very well with some of her new. But don't for the present try to make her take up the cudgels for you. Her husband may have other views, and, as a person who wishes her well, I advise you not to multiply points of difference between them.'

Poor Rosier's face assumed an expression of alarm; a suit for the hand of Pansy Osmond was even a more complicated business than his taste for proper transitions had allowed. But the extreme good sense which he concealed under a surface suggesting that of a careful owner's 'best set' came to his assistance. 'I don't see that I'm bound to consider Mr Osmond so very much!' he exclaimed.

'No, but you should consider *her*. You say you're an old friend. Would you make her suffer?'

'Not for the world.'

'Then be very careful, and let the matter alone till I've taken a few soundings.'

'Let the matter alone, dear Madame Merle? Remember that I'm in love.'

'Oh, you won't burn up! Why did you come to me, if you're not to heed what I say?'

'You're very kind; I'll be very good,' the young man promised. 'But I'm afraid Mr Osmond's pretty hard,' he added in his mild voice as he went to the door.

Madame Merle gave a short laugh. 'It has been said before. But his wife isn't easy either.'

'Ah, she's a splendid woman!' Ned Rosier repeated, for departure.

He resolved that his conduct should be worthy of an aspirant who was already a model of discretion; but he saw nothing in any pledge he had given Madame Merle that made it improper he should keep himself in spirits by an occasional visit to Miss Osmond's home. He reflected constantly on what his adviser had said to him, and turned over in his mind the impression of her rather circumspect tone. He had gone to her *de confiance*, as they put it in Paris; but it was possible he had been precipitate. He found difficulty in thinking of himself as rash—he had incurred this reproach so rarely; but it certainly was true that he had known Madame Merle only for the last month, and that his thinking her a delightful woman was not, when one came to look into it, a reason for assuming that she would be eager to push Pansy Osmond into his arms, gracefully arranged as these members might be to receive her. She had indeed shown him benevolence, and she was a person of consideration among the girl's people, where she had a rather striking appearance (Rosier had more than once wondered how she managed it) of being intimate without being familiar. But possibly he had exaggerated these advantages. There was no particular reason why she should take trouble for him; a charming woman was charming to every one, and Rosier felt rather a fool when he thought of his having appealed to her on the ground that she had distinguished him. Very likely—though she had appeared to say it in joke—she was really only thinking of his *bibelots*. Had it come into her head that he might offer her two or three of the gems of his collection? If she would only help him to marry Miss Osmond he would present her with his whole museum. He could hardly say so to her outright; it would seem too gross a bribe. But he should like her to believe it.

It was with these thoughts that he went again to Mrs Osmond's, Mrs Osmond having an 'evening'—she had taken the Thursday of each week—when his presence could be accounted for on general principles of civility. The object of Mr Rosier's well-regulated affection dwelt in a high house in the very heart of Rome; a dark and massive structure overlooking a sunny *piazzetta* in the neighbourhood of the Farnese Palace.* In a palace, too, little Pansy lived—a palace by Roman measure, but a dungeon to poor Rosier's apprehensive mind. It seemed to him of evil omen that the young lady he wished to marry, and whose fastidious father he doubted of his ability to conciliate, should be immured in a kind of domestic fortress, a pile which bore a stern old Roman name, which smelt of historic deeds, of crime and craft and violence, which was mentioned in 'Murray' and visited by tourists who looked, on a vague survey, disappointed and depressed, and which had frescoes by Caravaggio in the *piano nobile** and a row of mutilated statues and dusty urns in the wide, nobly-arched loggia overhanging the damp court where a fountain gushed out of a mossy niche. In a less preoccupied frame of mind he could have done justice to the Palazzo Roccanera;* he could have entered into the sentiment of Mrs Osmond, who had once told him that on settling themselves in Rome she and her husband had chosen this habitation for the love of local colour. It had local colour enough, and though he knew less about architecture than about Limoges enamels* he could see that the proportions of the windows and even the details of the cornice had quite the grand air. But Rosier was haunted by the conviction that at picturesque periods young girls had been shut up there to keep them from their true loves, and then, under the threat of being thrown into convents, had been forced into unholy marriages. There was one point, however, to which he always did justice when once he found himself in Mrs Osmond's warm, rich-looking reception-rooms, which were on the second floor. He acknowledged that these people were very strong in 'good things.' It was a taste of Osmond's own—not at all of hers; this she had told him the first time he came to the house, when, after asking himself for

a quarter of an hour whether they had even better ‘French’ than he in Paris, he was obliged on the spot to admit that they had, very much, and vanquished his envy, as a gentleman should, to the point of expressing to his hostess his pure admiration of her treasures. He learned from Mrs Osmond that her husband had made a large collection before their marriage and that, though he had annexed a number of fine pieces within the last three years, he had achieved his greatest finds at a time when he had not the advantage of her advice. Rosier interpreted this information according to principles of his own. For ‘advice’ read ‘cash,’ he said to himself; and the fact that Gilbert Osmond had landed his highest prizes during his impecunious season confirmed his most cherished doctrine—the doctrine that a collector may freely be poor if he be only patient. In general, when Rosier presented himself on a Thursday evening, his first recognition was for the walls of the saloon; there were three or four objects his eyes really yearned for. But after his talk with Madame Merle he felt the extreme seriousness of his position; and now, when he came in, he looked about for the daughter of the house with such eagerness as might be permitted a gentleman whose smile, as he crossed a threshold, always took everything comfortable for granted.

XXXVII

PANSY was not in the first of the rooms, a large apartment with a concave ceiling and walls covered with old red damask; it was here Mrs Osmond usually sat—though she was not in her most customary place to-night—and that a circle of more special intimates gathered about the fire. The room was flushed with subdued, diffused brightness; it contained the larger things and—almost always—an odour of flowers. Pansy on this occasion was presumably in the next of the series, the resort of younger visitors, where tea was served. Osmond stood before the chimney, leaning back with his hands behind him; he had one foot up and was warming the sole. Half a dozen persons, scattered near him, were talking together; but he was not in the conversation; his eyes had an expression, frequent with them, that seemed to represent them as engaged with objects more worth their while than the appearances actually thrust upon them. Rosier, coming in unannounced, failed to attract his attention; but the young man, who was very punctilious, though he was even exceptionally conscious that it was the wife, not the husband, he had come to see, went up to shake hands with him. Osmond put out his left hand, without changing his attitude.

'How d'ye do? My wife's somewhere about.'

'Never fear; I shall find her,' said Rosier cheerfully.

Osmond, however, took him in; he had never in his life felt himself so efficiently looked at. 'Madame Merle has told him, and he doesn't like it,' he privately reasoned. He had hoped Madame Merle would be there, but she was not in sight; perhaps she was in one of the other rooms or would come later. He had never especially delighted in Gilbert Osmond, having a fancy he gave himself airs. But Rosier was not quickly resentful, and where politeness was concerned had ever a strong need of being quite in the right. He looked round him and smiled, all without help, and then in a moment, 'I saw a jolly good piece of Capo di Monte* to-day,' he said.

Osmond answered nothing at first; but presently, while he warmed his boot-sole, 'I don't care a fig for Capo di Monte!' he returned.

'I hope you're not losing your interest?'

'In old pots and plates? Yes, I'm losing my interest.'

Rosier for an instant forgot the delicacy of his position. 'You're not thinking of parting with a—a piece or two?'

'No, I'm not thinking of parting with anything at all, Mr Rosier,' said Osmond, with his eyes still on the eyes of his visitor.

'Ah, you want to keep, but not to add,' Rosier remarked brightly.

'Exactly. I've nothing I wish to match.'

Poor Rosier was aware he had blushed; he was distressed at his want of assurance. 'Ah, well, *I* have!' was all he could murmur; and he knew his murmur was partly lost as he turned away. He took his course to the adjoining room and met Mrs Osmond coming out of the deep doorway. She was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid, as he had said, and yet oh so radiantly gentle! We know what Mr Rosier thought of her and the terms in which, to Madame Merle, he had expressed his admiration. Like his appreciation of her dear little stepdaughter it was based partly on his eye for decorative character, his instinct for authenticity; but also on a sense for uncatalogued values, for that secret of a 'lustre' beyond any recorded losing or rediscovering, which his devotion to brittle wares had still not disqualified him to recognise. Mrs Osmond, at present, might well have gratified such tastes. The years had touched her only to enrich her; the flower of her youth had not faded, it only hung more quietly on its stem. She had lost something of that quick eagerness to which her husband had privately taken exception—she had more the air of being able to wait. Now, at all events, framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady. 'You see I'm very regular,' he said. 'But who should be if I'm not?'

'Yes, I've known you longer than any one here. But we mustn't indulge in tender reminiscences. I want to introduce you to a young lady.'

'Ah, please, what young lady?' Rosier was immensely obliging; but this was not what he had come for.

'She sits there by the fire in pink and has no one to speak to.'

Rosier hesitated a moment. 'Can't Mr Osmond speak to her? He's within six feet of her.'

Mrs Osmond also hesitated. 'She's not very lively, and he doesn't like dull people.'

‘But she’s good enough for me? Ah now, that’s hard!’

‘I only mean that you’ve ideas for two. And then you’re so obliging.’

‘So is your husband.’

‘No, he’s not—to me.’ And Mrs Osmond vaguely smiled.

‘That’s a sign he should be doubly so to other women.’

‘So I tell him,’ she said, still smiling.

‘You see I want some tea,’ Rosier went on, looking wistfully beyond.

‘That’s perfect. Go and give some to my young lady.’

‘Very good; but after that I’ll abandon her to her fate. The simple truth is I’m dying to have a little talk with Miss Osmond.’

‘Ah,’ said Isabel, turning away, ‘I can’t help you there!’

Five minutes later, while he handed a tea-cup to the damsel in pink, whom he had conducted into the other room, he wondered whether, in making to Mrs Osmond the profession I have just quoted, he had broken the spirit of his promise to Madame Merle. Such a question was capable of occupying this young man’s mind for a considerable time. At last, however, he became—comparatively speaking—reckless; he cared little what promises he might break. The fate to which he had threatened to abandon the damsel in pink proved to be none so terrible; for Pansy Osmond, who had given him the tea for his companion—Pansy was as fond as ever of making tea—presently came and talked to her. Into this mild colloquy Edward Rosier entered little; he sat by moodily, watching his small sweetheart. If we look at her now through his eyes we shall at first not see much to remind us of the obedient little girl who, at Florence, three years before, was sent to walk short distances in the Cascine while her father and Miss Archer talked together of matters sacred to elder people. But after a moment we shall perceive that if at nineteen Pansy has become a young lady she doesn’t really fill out the part; that if she has grown very pretty she lacks in a deplorable degree the quality known and esteemed in the appearance of females as style; and that if she is dressed with great freshness she wears her smart attire with an undisguised appearance of saving it—very much as if it were lent her for the occasion. Edward Rosier, it would seem, would have been just the man to note these defects; and in point of fact there was not a quality of this young lady, of any sort, that he had not noted. Only he called her qualities by names of his own—some of which indeed were happy enough. ‘No, she’s unique—she’s absolutely unique,’ he used to say to himself; and you may be sure that not for an instant would he have admitted to you that she was wanting in style. Style? Why, she had the style of a little princess; if you couldn’t see it you had no eye. It was not modern, it was not conscious, it would produce no impression in Broadway; the small, serious damsel, in her stiff little dress, only looked like an Infanta of Velasquez.* This was enough for Edward Rosier, who thought her delightfully old-fashioned. Her anxious eyes, her charming lips, her slip of a figure, were as touching as a childish prayer. He had now an acute desire to know just to what point she liked him—a desire which made him fidget as he sat in his chair. It made him feel hot, so that he had to pat his forehead with his handkerchief; he had never been so uncomfortable. She was such a perfect *jeune fille*,* and one couldn’t make of a *jeune fille* the enquiry requisite for throwing light on such a point. A *jeune fille* was what Rosier had always dreamed of—a *jeune fille* who should yet not be French, for he had felt that this nationality would complicate the question. He was sure Pansy had never looked at a newspaper and that, in the way of novels, if she had read Sir Walter Scott* it was the very most. An American *jeune fille*—what could be better than that? She would be frank and gay, and yet would not have walked alone, nor have received letters from men, nor have been taken to the theatre to see the comedy of manners. Rosier could not deny that, as the matter stood, it would be a breach of hospitality to appeal directly to this unsophisticated creature; but he was now in imminent danger of asking himself if hospitality were the most sacred thing in the world. Was not the sentiment that he entertained for Miss Osmond of infinitely greater importance? Of greater importance to him—yes; but not probably to the master of the house. There was one comfort; even if this gentleman had been placed on his guard by Madame Merle he would not have extended the warning to Pansy; it would not have been part of his policy to let her know that a prepossessing young man was in love with her. But he *was* in love with her, the prepossessing young man; and all these restrictions of circumstance had ended by irritating him. What had Gilbert Osmond meant by giving him two fingers of his left hand? If Osmond was rude, surely he himself might be bold. He felt extremely bold after the dull girl in so vain a disguise of rosecolour had responded to the call of her mother, who came in to say, with a significant simper at Rosier, that she must carry her off to other triumphs. The mother and daughter departed together, and now it depended only upon him that he should be virtually alone with Pansy. He had never been alone with her before; he had never been alone with a *jeune fille*. It was a great moment; poor Rosier began to pat his forehead again. There was another

room beyond the one in which they stood—a small room that had been thrown open and lighted, but that, the company not being numerous, had remained empty all the evening. It was empty yet; it was upholstered in pale yellow; there were several lamps; through the open door it looked the very temple of authorised love. Rosier gazed a moment through this aperture; he was afraid that Pansy would run away, and felt almost capable of stretching out a hand to detain her. But she lingered where the other maiden had left them, making no motion to join a knot of visitors on the far side of the room. For a little it occurred to him that she was frightened—too frightened perhaps to move; but a second glance assured him she was not, and he then reflected that she was too innocent indeed for that. After a supreme hesitation he asked her if he might go and look at the yellow room, which seemed so attractive yet so virginal. He had been there already with Osmond, to inspect the furniture, which was of the First French Empire, and especially to admire the clock (which he didn't really admire), an immense classic structure of that period. He therefore felt that he had now begun to manœuvre.

'Certainly, you may go,' said Pansy; 'and if you like I'll show you.' She was not in the least frightened.

'That's just what I hoped you'd say; you're so very kind,' Rosier murmured.

They went in together; Rosier really thought the room very ugly, and it seemed cold. The same idea appeared to have struck Pansy. 'It's not for winter evenings; it's more for summer,' she said. 'It's papa's taste; he has so much.'

He had a good deal, Rosier thought; but some of it was very bad. He looked about him; he hardly knew what to say in such a situation. 'Doesn't Mrs Osmond care how her rooms are done? Has she no taste?' he asked.

'Oh yes, a great deal; but it's more for literature,' said Pansy—'and for conversation. But papa cares also for those things. I think he knows everything.'

Rosier was silent a little. 'There's one thing I'm sure he knows!' he broke out presently. 'He knows that when I come here it's, with all respect to him, with all respect to Mrs Osmond, who's so charming—it's really,' said the young man, 'to see you!'

'To see me?' And Pansy raised her vaguely-troubled eyes.

'To see you; that's what I come for,' Rosier repeated, feeling the intoxication of a rupture with authority.

Pansy stood looking at him, simply, intently, openly; a blush was not needed to make her face more modest. 'I thought it was for that.'

'And it was not disagreeable to you?'

'I couldn't tell; I didn't know. You never told me,' said Pansy.

'I was afraid of offending you.'

'You don't offend me,' the young girl murmured, smiling as if an angel had kissed her.

'You like me then, Pansy?' Rosier asked very gently, feeling very happy.

'Yes—I like you.'

They had walked to the chimney-piece where the big cold Empire clock was perched; they were well within the room and beyond observation from without. The tone in which she had said these four words seemed to him the very breath of nature, and his only answer could be to take her hand and hold it a moment. Then he raised it to his lips. She submitted, still with her pure, trusting smile, in which there was something ineffably passive. She liked him—she had liked him all the while; now anything might happen! She was ready—she had been ready always, waiting for him to speak. If he had not spoken she would have waited for ever; but when the word came she dropped like the peach from the shaken tree. Rosier felt that if he should draw her toward him and hold her to his heart she would submit without a murmur, would rest there without a question. It was true that this would be a rash experiment in a yellow Empire *salottino*.* She had known it was for her he came, and yet like what a perfect little lady she had carried it off!

'You're very dear to me,' he murmured, trying to believe that there was after all such a thing as hospitality.

She looked a moment at her hand, where he had kissed it. 'Did you say papa knows?'

'You told me just now he knows everything.'

'I think you must make sure,' said Pansy.

'Ah, my dear, when once I'm sure of *you*!' Rosier murmured in her ear; whereupon she turned back to the other rooms with a little air of consistency which seemed to imply that their appeal should be immediate.

The other rooms meanwhile had become conscious of the arrival of Madame Merle, who, wherever she went, produced an impression when she entered. How she did it the most attentive spectator could not have told you, for she neither spoke loud, nor laughed profusely, nor moved rapidly, nor dressed with splendour, nor appealed in any appreciable manner to the audience. Large, fair, smiling, serene, there was something in her very tranquillity that diffused itself, and when people looked round it was because of a sudden quiet. On this occasion she had done the quietest thing she could do; after embracing Mrs Osmond, which was more striking, she had sat down on a small sofa to commune with the master of the house. There was a brief exchange of commonplaces between these two—they always paid, in public, a certain formal tribute to the commonplace—and then Madame Merle, whose eyes had been wandering, asked if little Mr Rosier had come this evening.

'He came nearly an hour ago—but he has disappeared,' Osmond said.

'And where's Pansy?'

'In the other room. There are several people there.'

'He's probably among them,' said Madame Merle.

'Do you wish to see him?' Osmond asked in a provokingly pointless tone.

Madame Merle looked at him a moment; she knew each of his tones to the eighth of a note. 'Yes, I should like to say to him that I've told you what he wants, and that it interests you but feebly.'

'Don't tell him that. He'll try to interest me more—which is exactly what I don't want. Tell him I hate his proposal.'

'But you don't hate it.'

'It doesn't signify; I don't love it. I let him see that, myself, this evening; I was rude to him on purpose. That sort of thing's a great bore. There's no hurry.'

'I'll tell him that you'll take time and think it over.'

'No, don't do that. He'll hang on.'

'If I discourage him he'll do the same.'

'Yes, but in the one case he'll try to talk and explain—which would be exceedingly tiresome. In the other he'll probably hold his tongue and go in for some deeper game. That will leave me quiet. I hate talking with a donkey.'

'Is that what you call poor Mr Rosier?'

'Oh, he's a nuisance—with his eternal majolica.'*

Madame Merle dropped her eyes; she had a faint smile. 'He's a gentleman, he has a charming temper; and, after all, an income of forty thousand francs!'

'It's misery—"genteel" misery,' Osmond broke in. 'It's not what I've dreamed of for Pansy.'

'Very good then. He has promised me not to speak to her.'

'Do you believe him?' Osmond asked absent-mindedly.

'Perfectly. Pansy has thought a great deal about him; but I don't suppose you consider that that matters.'

'I don't consider it matters at all; but neither do I believe she has thought of him.'

'That opinion's more convenient,' said Madame Merle quietly.

'Has she told you she's in love with him?'

'For what do you take her? And for what do you take me?' Madame Merle added in a moment.

Osmond had raised his foot and was resting his slim ankle on the other knee; he clasped his ankle in his hand familiarly—his long, fine forefinger and thumb could make a ring for it—and gazed a while before him. 'This kind of thing doesn't find me unprepared. It's what I educated her for. It was all for this—that when such a case should come up she should do what I prefer.'

'I'm not afraid that she'll not do it.'

'Well then, where's the hitch?'

'I don't see any. But, all the same, I recommend you not to get rid of Mr Rosier. Keep him on hand; he may be useful.'

'I can't keep him. Keep him yourself.'

'Very good; I'll put him into a corner and allow him so much a day.' Madame Merle had, for the most part, while they talked, been glancing about her; it was her habit in this situation, just as it was her habit to interpose a good many blank-looking pauses. A long drop followed the last words I have quoted; and

before it had ended she saw Pansy come out of the adjoining room, followed by Edward Rosier. The girl advanced a few steps and then stopped and stood looking at Madame Merle and at her father.

'He has spoken to her,' Madame Merle went on to Osmond.

Her companion never turned his head. 'So much for your belief in his promises. He ought to be horse-whipped.'

'He intends to confess, poor little man!'

Osmond got up; he had now taken a sharp look at his daughter. 'It doesn't matter,' he murmured, turning away.

Pansy after a moment came up to Madame Merle with her little manner of unfamiliar politeness. This lady's reception of her was not more intimate; she simply, as she rose from the sofa, gave her a friendly smile.

'You're very late,' the young creature gently said.

'My dear child, I'm never later than I intend to be.'

Madame Merle had not got up to be gracious to Pansy; she moved toward Edward Rosier. He came to meet her and, very quickly, as if to get it off his mind, 'I've spoken to her!' he whispered.

'I know it, Mr Rosier.'

'Did she tell you?'

'Yes, she told me. Behave properly for the rest of the evening, and come and see me to-morrow at a quarter past five.' She was severe, and in the manner in which she turned her back to him there was a degree of contempt which caused him to mutter a decent imprecation.

He had no intention of speaking to Osmond; it was neither the time nor the place. But he instinctively wandered toward Isabel, who sat talking with an old lady. He sat down on the other side of her; the old lady was Italian, and Rosier took for granted she understood no English. 'You said just now you wouldn't help me,' he began to Mrs Osmond. 'Perhaps you'll feel differently when you know—when you know—!'

Isabel met his hesitation. 'When I know what?'

'That she's all right.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Well, that we've come to an understanding.'

'She's all wrong,' said Isabel. 'It won't do.'

Poor Rosier gazed at her half-pleadingly, half-angrily; a sudden flush testified to his sense of injury. 'I've never been treated so,' he said. 'What is there against me, after all? That's not the way I'm usually considered. I could have married twenty times.'

'It's a pity you didn't. I don't mean twenty times, but once, comfortably,' Isabel added, smiling kindly. 'You're not rich enough for Pansy.'

'She doesn't care a straw for one's money.'

'No, but her father does.'

'Ah yes, he has proved that!' cried the young man.

Isabel got up, turning away from him, leaving her old lady without ceremony; and he occupied himself for the next ten minutes in pretending to look at Gilbert Osmond's collection of miniatures, which were neatly arranged on a series of small velvet screens. But he looked without seeing; his cheek burned; he was too full of his sense of injury. It was certain that he had never been treated that way before; he was not used to being thought not good enough. He knew how good he was, and if such a fallacy had not been so pernicious he could have laughed at it. He searched again for Pansy, but she had disappeared, and his main desire was now to get out of the house. Before doing so he spoke once more to Isabel; it was not agreeable to him to reflect that he had just said a rude thing to her—the only point that would now justify a low view of him.

'I referred to Mr Osmond as I shouldn't have done, a while ago,' he began. 'But you must remember my situation.'

'I don't remember what you said,' she answered coldly.

'Ah, you're offended, and now you'll never help me.'

She was silent an instant, and then with a change of tone: 'It's not that I won't; I simply can't!' Her manner was almost passionate.

'If you *could*, just a little, I'd never again speak of your husband save as an angel.'

‘The inducement’s great,’ said Isabel gravely—inscrutably, as he afterwards, to himself, called it; and she gave him, straight in the eyes, a look which was also inscrutable. It made him remember somehow that he had known her as a child; and yet it was keener than he liked, and he took himself off.

XXXVIII

HE went to see Madame Merle on the morrow, and to his surprise she let him off rather easily. But she made him promise that he would stop there till something should have been decided. Mr Osmond had had higher expectations; it was very true that as he had no intention of giving his daughter a portion such expectations were open to criticism or even, if one would, to ridicule. But she would advise Mr Rosier not to take that tone; if he would possess his soul in patience he might arrive at his felicity. Mr Osmond was not favourable to his suit, but it wouldn't be a miracle if he should gradually come round. Pansy would never defy her father, he might depend on that; so nothing was to be gained by precipitation. Mr Osmond needed to accustom his mind to an offer of a sort that he had not hitherto entertained, and this result must come of itself—it was useless to try to force it. Rosier remarked that his own situation would be in the meanwhile the most uncomfortable in the world, and Madame Merle assured him that she felt for him. But, as she justly declared, one couldn't have everything one wanted; she had learned that lesson for herself. There would be no use in his writing to Gilbert Osmond, who had charged her to tell him as much. He wished the matter dropped for a few weeks and would himself write when he should have anything to communicate that it might please Mr Rosier to hear.

'He doesn't like your having spoken to Pansy. Ah, he doesn't like it at all,' said Madame Merle.

'I'm perfectly willing to give him a chance to tell me so!'

'If you do that he'll tell you more than you care to hear. Go to the house, for the next month, as little as possible, and leave the rest to me.'

'As little as possible? Who's to measure the possibility?'

'Let me measure it. Go on Thursday evenings with the rest of the world, but don't go at all at odd times, and don't fret about Pansy. I'll see that she understands everything. She's a calm little nature; she'll take it quietly.'

Edward Rosier fretted about Pansy a good deal, but he did as he was advised, and awaited another Thursday evening before returning to Palazzo Roccanera. There had been a party at dinner, so that though he went early the company was already tolerably numerous. Osmond, as usual, was in the first room, near the fire, staring straight at the door, so that, not to be distinctly uncivil, Rosier had to go and speak to him.

'I'm glad that you can take a hint,' Pansy's father said, slightly closing his keen, conscious eyes.

'I take no hints. But I took a message, as I supposed it to be.'

'You took it? Where did you take it?'

It seemed to poor Rosier he was being insulted, and he waited a moment, asking himself how much a true lover ought to submit to. 'Madame Merle gave me, as I understood it, a message from you—to the effect that you declined to give me the opportunity I desire, the opportunity to explain my wishes to you.' And he flattered himself he spoke rather sternly.

'I don't see what Madame Merle has to do with it. Why did you apply to Madame Merle?'

'I asked her for an opinion—for nothing more. I did so because she had seemed to me to know you very well.'

'She doesn't know me so well as she thinks,' said Osmond.

'I'm sorry for that, because she has given me some little ground for hope.'

Osmond stared into the fire a moment. 'I set a great price on my daughter.'

'You can't set a higher one than I do. Don't I prove it by wishing to marry her?'

'I wish to marry her very well,' Osmond went on with a dry impertinence which, in another mood, poor Rosier would have admired.

'Of course I pretend she'd marry well in marrying me. She couldn't marry a man who loves her more—or whom, I may venture to add, she loves more.'

'I'm not bound to accept your theories as to whom my daughter loves'—and Osmond looked up with a quick, cold smile.

'I'm not theorising. Your daughter has spoken.'

'Not to me,' Osmond continued, now bending forward a little and dropping his eyes to his boot-toes.

‘I have her promise, sir!’ cried Rosier with the sharpness of exasperation.

As their voices had been pitched very low before, such a note attracted some attention from the company. Osmond waited till this little movement had subsided; then he said, all undisturbed: ‘I think she has no recollection of having given it.’

They had been standing with their faces to the fire, and after he had uttered these last words the master of the house turned round again to the room. Before Rosier had time to reply he perceived that a gentleman—a stranger—had just come in, unannounced, according to the Roman custom, and was about to present himself to his host. The latter smiled blandly, but somewhat blankly; the visitor had a handsome face and a large, fair beard, and was evidently an Englishman.

‘You apparently don’t recognise me,’ he said with a smile that expressed more than Osmond’s.

‘Ah yes, now I do. I expected so little to see you.’

Rosier departed and went in direct pursuit of Pansy. He sought her, as usual, in the neighbouring room, but he again encountered Mrs Osmond in his path. He gave his hostess no greeting—he was too righteously indignant, but said to her crudely: ‘Your husband’s awfully cold-blooded.’

She gave the same mystical smile he had noticed before. ‘You can’t expect every one to be as hot as yourself.’

‘I don’t pretend to be cold, but I’m cool. What has he been doing to his daughter?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Don’t you take any interest?’ Rosier demanded with his sense that she too was irritating.

For a moment she answered nothing; then, ‘No!’ she said abruptly and with a quickened light in her eyes which directly contradicted the word.

‘Pardon me if I don’t believe that. Where’s Miss Osmond?’

‘In the corner, making tea. Please leave her there.’

Rosier instantly discovered his friend, who had been hidden by intervening groups. He watched her, but her own attention was entirely given to her occupation. ‘What on earth has he done to her?’ he asked again imploringly. ‘He declares to me she has given me up.’

‘She has not given you up,’ Isabel said in a low tone and without looking at him.

‘Ah, thank you for that! Now I’ll leave her alone as long as you think proper!’

He had hardly spoken when he saw her change colour, and became aware that Osmond was coming toward her accompanied by the gentleman who had just entered. He judged the latter, in spite of the advantage of good looks and evident social experience, a little embarrassed. ‘Isabel,’ said her husband, ‘I bring you an old friend.’

Mrs Osmond’s face, though it wore a smile, was, like her old friend’s, not perfectly confident. ‘I’m very happy to see Lord Warburton,’ she said. Rosier turned away and, now that his talk with her had been interrupted, felt absolved from the little pledge he had just taken. He had a quick impression that Mrs Osmond wouldn’t notice what he did.

Isabel in fact, to do him justice, for some time quite ceased to observe him. She had been startled; she hardly knew if she felt a pleasure or a pain. Lord Warburton, however, now that he was face to face with her, was plainly quite sure of his own sense of the matter; though his grey eyes had still their fine original property of keeping recognition and attestation strictly sincere. He was ‘heavier’ than of yore and looked older; he stood there very solidly and sensibly.

‘I suppose you didn’t expect to see me,’ he said; ‘I’ve but just arrived. Literally, I only got here this evening. You see I’ve lost no time in coming to pay you my respects. I knew you were at home on Thursdays.’

‘You see the fame of your Thursdays has spread to England,’ Osmond remarked to his wife.

‘It’s very kind of Lord Warburton to come so soon; we’re greatly flattered,’ Isabel said.

‘Ah well, it’s better than stopping in one of those horrible inns,’ Osmond went on.

‘The hotel seems very good; I think it’s the same at which I saw you four years since. You know it was here in Rome that we first met; it’s a long time ago. Do you remember where I bade you good-bye?’ his lordship asked of his hostess. ‘It was in the Capitol, in the first room.’

‘I remember that myself,’ said Osmond. ‘I was there at the time.’

‘Yes, I remember you there. I was very sorry to leave Rome—so sorry that, somehow or other, it became almost a dismal memory, and I’ve never cared to come back till to-day. But I knew you were living here,’ her old friend went on to Isabel, ‘and I assure you I’ve often thought of you. It must be a

charming place to live in,' he added with a look, round him, at her established home, in which she might have caught the dim ghost of his old ruefulness.

'We should have been glad to see you at any time,' Osmond observed with propriety.

'Thank you very much. I haven't been out of England since then. Till a month ago I really supposed my travels over.'

'I've heard of you from time to time,' said Isabel, who had already, with her rare capacity for such inward feats, taken the measure of what meeting him again meant for her.

'I hope you've heard no harm. My life has been a remarkably complete blank.'

'Like the good reigns in history,' Osmond suggested. He appeared to think his duties as a host now terminated—he had performed them so conscientiously. Nothing could have been more adequate, more nicely measured, than his courtesy to his wife's old friend. It was punctilious, it was explicit, it was everything but natural—a deficiency which Lord Warburton, who, himself, had on the whole a good deal of nature, may be supposed to have perceived. 'I'll leave you and Mrs Osmond together,' he added. 'You have reminiscences into which I don't enter.'

'I'm afraid you lose a good deal!' Lord Warburton called after him, as he moved away, in a tone which perhaps betrayed overmuch an appreciation of his generosity. Then the visitor turned on Isabel the deeper, the deepest, consciousness of his look, which gradually became more serious. 'I'm really very glad to see you.'

'It's very pleasant. You're very kind.'

'Do you know that you're changed—a little?'

She just hesitated. 'Yes—a good deal.'

'I don't mean for the worse, of course; and yet how can I say for the better?'

'I think I shall have no scruple in saying that to *you*,' she bravely returned.

'Ah well, for me—it's a long time. It would be a pity there shouldn't be something to show for it.' They sat down and she asked him about his sisters, with other enquiries of a somewhat perfunctory kind. He answered her questions as if they interested him, and in a few moments she saw—or believed she saw—that he would press with less of his whole weight than of yore. Time had breathed upon his heart and, without chilling it, given it a relieved sense of having taken the air. Isabel felt her usual esteem for Time rise at a bound. Her friend's manner was certainly that of a contented man, one who would rather like people, or like her at least, to know him for such. 'There's something I must tell you without more delay,' he resumed. 'I've brought Ralph Touchett with me.'

'Brought him with you?' Isabel's surprise was great.

'He's at the hotel; he was too tired to come out and has gone to bed.'

'I'll go to see him,' she immediately said.

'That's exactly what I hoped you'd do. I had an idea you hadn't seen much of him since your marriage, that in fact your relations were a—a little more formal. That's why I hesitated—like an awkward Briton.'

'I'm as fond of Ralph as ever,' Isabel answered. 'But why has he come to Rome?' The declaration was very gentle, the question a little sharp.

'Because he's very far gone, Mrs Osmond.'

'Rome then is no place for him. I heard from him that he had determined to give up his custom of wintering abroad and to remain in England, indoors, in what he called an artificial climate.'

'Poor fellow, he doesn't succeed with the artificial! I went to see him three weeks ago, at Gardencourt, and found him thoroughly ill. He has been getting worse every year, and now he has no strength left. He smokes no more cigarettes! He had got up an artificial climate indeed; the house was as hot as Calcutta. Nevertheless he had suddenly taken it into his head to start for Sicily. I didn't believe in it—neither did the doctors, nor any of his friends. His mother, as I suppose you know, is in America, so there was no one to prevent him. He stuck to his idea that it would be the saving of him to spend the winter at Catania. He said he could take servants and furniture, could make himself comfortable, but in point of fact he hasn't brought anything. I wanted him at least to go by sea, to save fatigue; but he said he hated the sea and wished to stop at Rome. After that, though I thought it all rubbish, I made up my mind to come with him. I'm acting as—what do you call it in America?—as a kind of moderator. Poor Ralph's very moderate now. We left England a fortnight ago, and he has been very bad on the way. He can't keep warm, and the further south we come the more he feels the cold. He has got rather a good man, but I'm afraid he's beyond human help. I wanted him to take with him some clever fellow—I mean some sharp young

doctor; but he wouldn't hear of it. If you don't mind my saying so, I think it was a most extraordinary time for Mrs Touchett to decide on going to America.'

Isabel had listened eagerly; her face was full of pain and wonder. 'My aunt does that at fixed periods and lets nothing turn her aside. When the date comes round she starts; I think she'd have started if Ralph had been dying.'

'I sometimes think he *is* dying,' Lord Warburton said.

Isabel sprang up. 'I'll go to him then now.'

He checked her; he was a little disconcerted at the quick effect of his words. 'I don't mean I thought so to-night. On the contrary, today, in the train, he seemed particularly well; the idea of our reaching Rome —he's very fond of Rome, you know—gave him strength. An hour ago, when I bade him good-night, he told me he was very tired, but very happy. Go to him in the morning; that's all I mean. I didn't tell him I was coming here; I didn't decide to till after we had separated. Then I remembered he had told me you had an evening, and that it was this very Thursday. It occurred to me to come in and tell you he's here, and let you know you had perhaps better not wait for him to call. I think he said he hadn't written to you.' There was no need of Isabel's declaring that she would act upon Lord Warburton's information; she looked, as she sat there, like a winged creature held back. 'Let alone that I wanted to see you myself,' her visitor gallantly added.

'I don't understand Ralph's plan; it seems to me very wild,' she said. 'I was glad to think of him between those thick walls at Gardencourt.'

'He was completely alone there; the thick walls were his only company.'

'You went to see him; you've been extremely kind.'

'Oh dear, I had nothing to do,' said Lord Warburton.

'We hear, on the contrary, that you're doing great things. Every one speaks of you as a great statesman, and I'm perpetually seeing your name in the *Times*, which, by the way, doesn't appear to hold it in reverence. You're apparently as wild a radical as ever.'

'I don't feel nearly so wild; you know the world has come round to me. Touchett and I have kept up a sort of parliamentary debate all the way from London. I tell him he's the last of the Tories, and he calls me the King of the Goths*—says I have, down to the details of my personal appearance, every sign of the brute. So you see there's life in him yet.'

Isabel had many questions to ask about Ralph, but she abstained from asking them all. She would see for herself on the morrow. She perceived that after a little Lord Warburton would tire of that subject—he had a conception of other possible topics. She was more and more able to say to herself that he had recovered, and, what is more to the point, she was able to say it without bitterness. He had been for her, of old, such an image of urgency, of insistence, of something to be resisted and reasoned with, that his reappearance at first menaced her with a new trouble. But she was now reassured; she could see he only wished to live with her on good terms, that she was to understand he had forgiven her and was incapable of the bad taste of making pointed allusions. This was not a form of revenge, of course; she had no suspicion of his wishing to punish her by an exhibition of disillusionment; she did him the justice to believe it had simply occurred to him that she would now take a good-natured interest in knowing he was resigned. It was the resignation of a healthy, manly nature, in which sentimental wounds could never fester. British politics had cured him; she had known they would. She gave an envious thought to the happier lot of men, who are always free to plunge into the healing waters of action. Lord Warburton of course spoke of the past, but he spoke of it without implications; he even went so far as to allude to their former meeting in Rome as a very jolly time. And he told her he had been immensely interested in hearing of her marriage and that it was a great pleasure for him to make Mr Osmond's acquaintance—since he could hardly be said to have made it on the other occasion. He had not written to her at the time of that passage in her history, but he didn't apologise to her for this. The only thing he implied was that they were old friends, intimate friends. It was very much as an intimate friend that he said to her, suddenly, after a short pause which he had occupied in smiling, as he looked about him, like a person amused, at a provincial entertainment, by some innocent game of guesses——

'Well now, I suppose you're very happy and all that sort of thing?'

Isabel answered with a quick laugh; the tone of his remark struck her almost as the accent of comedy. 'Do you suppose if I were not I'd tell you?'

'Well, I don't know. I don't see why not.'

'I do then. Fortunately, however, I'm very happy.'

'You've got an awfully good house.'

‘Yes, it’s very pleasant. But that’s not my merit—it’s my husband’s.’

‘You mean he has arranged it?’

‘Yes, it was nothing when we came.’

‘He must be very clever.’

‘He has a genius for upholstery,’ said Isabel.

‘There’s a great rage for that sort of thing now. But you must have a taste of your own.’

‘I enjoy things when they’re done, but I’ve no ideas. I can never propose anything.’

‘Do you mean you accept what others propose?’

‘Very willingly, for the most part.’

‘That’s a good thing to know. I shall propose to you something.’

‘It will be very kind. I must say, however, that I’ve in a few small ways a certain initiative. I should like for instance to introduce you to some of these people.’

‘Oh, please don’t; I prefer sitting here. Unless it be to that young lady in the blue dress. She has a charming face.’

‘The one talking to the rosy young man? That’s my husband’s daughter.’

‘Lucky man, your husband. What a dear little maid!’

‘You must make her acquaintance.’

‘In a moment—with pleasure. I like looking at her from here.’ He ceased to look at her, however, very soon; his eyes constantly reverted to Mrs Osmond. ‘Do you know I was wrong just now in saying you had changed?’ he presently went on. ‘You seem to me, after all, very much the same.’

‘And yet I find it a great change to be married,’ said Isabel with mild gaiety.

‘It affects most people more than it has affected you. You see I haven’t gone in for that.’

‘It rather surprises me.’

‘You ought to understand it, Mrs Osmond. But I do want to marry,’ he added more simply.

‘It ought to be very easy,’ Isabel said, rising—after which she reflected, with a pang perhaps too visible, that she was hardly the person to say this. It was perhaps because Lord Warburton divined the pang that he generously forbore to call her attention to her not having contributed then to the facility.

Edward Rosier had meanwhile seated himself on an ottoman beside Pansy’s tea-table. He pretended at first to talk to her about trifles, and she asked him who was the new gentleman conversing with her stepmother.

‘He’s an English lord,’ said Rosier. ‘I don’t know more.’

‘I wonder if he’ll have some tea. The English are so fond of tea.’

‘Never mind that; I’ve something particular to say to you.’

‘Don’t speak so loud—every one will hear,’ said Pansy.

‘They won’t hear if you continue to look that way; as if your only thought in life was the wish the kettle would boil.’

‘It has just been filled; the servants never know!’—she sighed with the weight of her responsibility.

‘Do you know what your father said to me just now? That you didn’t mean what you said a week ago.’

‘I don’t mean everything I say. How can a young girl do that? But I mean what I say to *you*.’

‘He told me you had forgotten me.’

‘Ah no, I don’t forget,’ said Pansy, showing her pretty teeth in a fixed smile.

‘Then everything’s just the very same?’

‘Ah no, not the very same. Papa has been terribly severe.’

‘What has he done to you?’

‘He asked me what *you* had done to me, and I told him everything. Then he forbade me to marry you.’

‘You needn’t mind that.’

‘Oh yes, I must indeed. I can’t disobey papa.’

‘Not for one who loves you as I do, and whom you pretend to love?’

She raised the lid of the tea-pot, gazing into this vessel for a moment; then she dropped six words into its aromatic depths. ‘I love you just as much.’

‘What good will that do me?’

‘Ah,’ said Pansy, raising her sweet, vague eyes, ‘I don’t know that.’

‘You disappoint me,’ groaned poor Rosier.

She was silent a little; she handed a tea-cup to a servant. ‘Please don’t talk any more.’

‘Is this to be all my satisfaction?’

‘Papa said I was not to talk with you.’

‘Do you sacrifice me like that? Ah, it’s too much!’

‘I wish you’d wait a little,’ said the girl in a voice just distinct enough to betray a quaver.

‘Of course I’ll wait if you’ll give me hope. But you take my life away.’

‘I’ll not give you up—oh no!’ Pansy went on.

‘He’ll try and make you marry some one else.’

‘I’ll never do that.’

‘What then are we to wait for?’

She hesitated again. ‘I’ll speak to Mrs Osmond and she’ll help us.’ It was in this manner that she for the most part designated her stepmother.

‘She won’t help us much. She’s afraid.’

‘Afraid of what?’

‘Of your father, I suppose.’

Pansy shook her little head. ‘She’s not afraid of any one. We must have patience.’

‘Ah, that’s an awful word,’ Rosier groaned; he was deeply disconcerted. Oblivious of the customs of good society, he dropped his head into his hands and, supporting it with a melancholy grace, sat staring at the carpet. Presently he became aware of a good deal of movement about him and, as he looked up, saw Pansy making a curtsey—it was still her little curtsey of the convent—to the English lord whom Mrs Osmond had introduced.

XXXIX

IT will probably not surprise the reflective reader that Ralph Touchett should have seen less of his cousin since her marriage than he had done before that event—an event of which he took such a view as could hardly prove a confirmation of intimacy. He had uttered his thought, as we know, and after this had held his peace, Isabel not having invited him to resume a discussion which marked an era in their relations. That discussion had made a difference—the difference he feared rather than the one he hoped. It had not chilled the girl's zeal in carrying out her engagement, but it had come dangerously near to spoiling a friendship. No reference was ever again made between them to Ralph's opinion of Gilbert Osmond, and by surrounding this topic with a sacred silence they managed to preserve a semblance of reciprocal frankness. But there was a difference, as Ralph often said to himself—there was a difference. She had not forgiven him, she never would forgive him: that was all he had gained. She thought she had forgiven him; she believed she didn't care; and as she was both very generous and very proud these convictions represented a certain reality. But whether or no the event should justify him he would virtually have done her a wrong, and the wrong was of the sort that women remember best. As Osmond's wife she could never again be his friend. If in this character she should enjoy the felicity she expected, she would have nothing but contempt for the man who had attempted, in advance, to undermine a blessing so dear; and if on the other hand his warning should be justified the vow she had taken that he should never know it would lay upon her spirit such a burden as to make her hate him. So dismal had been, during the year that followed his cousin's marriage, Ralph's prevision of the future; and if his meditations appear morbid we must remember he was not in the bloom of health. He consoled himself as he might by behaving (as he deemed) beautifully, and was present at the ceremony by which Isabel was united to Mr Osmond, and which was performed in Florence in the month of June. He learned from his mother that Isabel at first had thought of celebrating her nuptials in her native land, but that as simplicity was what she chiefly desired to secure she had finally decided, in spite of Osmond's professed willingness to make a journey of any length, that this characteristic would be best embodied in their being married by the nearest clergyman in the shortest time. The thing was done therefore at the little American chapel, on a very hot day, in the presence only of Mrs Touchett and her son, of Pansy Osmond and the Countess Gemini. That severity in the proceedings of which I just spoke was in part the result of the absence of two persons who might have been looked for on the occasion and who would have lent it a certain richness. Madame Merle had been invited, but Madame Merle, who was unable to leave Rome, had written a gracious letter of excuses. Henrietta Stackpole had not been invited, as her departure from America, announced to Isabel by Mr Goodwood, was in fact frustrated by the duties of her profession; but she had sent a letter, less gracious than Madame Merle's, intimating that, had she been able to cross the Atlantic, she would have been present not only as a witness but as a critic. Her return to Europe had taken place somewhat later, and she had effected a meeting with Isabel in the autumn, in Paris, when she had indulged—perhaps a trifle too freely—her critical genius. Poor Osmond, who was chiefly the subject of it, had protested so sharply that Henrietta was obliged to declare to Isabel that she had taken a step which put a barrier between them. 'It isn't in the least that you've married—it is that you have married *him*,' she had deemed it her duty to remark; agreeing, it will be seen, much more with Ralph Touchett than she suspected, though she had few of his hesitations and compunctions. Henrietta's second visit to Europe, however, was not apparently to have been made in vain; for just at the moment when Osmond had declared to Isabel that he really must object to that newspaper-woman, and Isabel had answered that it seemed to her he took Henrietta too hard, the good Mr Bantling had appeared upon the scene and proposed that they should take a run down to Spain. Henrietta's letters from Spain had proved the most acceptable she had yet published, and there had been one in especial, dated from the Alhambra and entitled 'Moors and Moonlight,' which generally passed for her masterpiece. Isabel had been secretly disappointed at her husband's not seeing his way simply to take the poor girl for funny. She even wondered if his sense of fun, or of the funny—which would be his sense of humour, wouldn't it?—were by chance defective. Of course she herself looked at the matter as a person whose present happiness had nothing to grudge to Henrietta's violated conscience. Osmond had thought their alliance a kind of monstrosity; he couldn't imagine what they had in common. For him, Mr Bantling's fellow tourist was simply the most vulgar of women, and he had also pronounced her the most abandoned. Against this latter clause of the verdict Isabel had appealed with an ardour that had made him wonder afresh at the oddity of some of his wife's tastes. Isabel could explain it only by saying that she liked to know people who were as different as

possible from herself. ‘Why then don’t you make the acquaintance of your washerwoman?’ Osmond had enquired; to which Isabel had answered that she was afraid her washerwoman wouldn’t care for her. Now Henrietta cared so much.

Ralph had seen nothing of her for the greater part of the two years that had followed her marriage; the winter that formed the beginning of her residence in Rome he had spent again at San Remo, where he had been joined in the spring by his mother, who afterwards had gone with him to England, to see what they were doing at the bank—an operation she couldn’t induce him to perform. Ralph had taken a lease of his house at San Remo, a small villa which he had occupied still another winter; but late in the month of April of this second year he had come down to Rome. It was the first time since her marriage that he had stood face to face with Isabel; his desire to see her again was then of the keenest. She had written to him from time to time, but her letters told him nothing he wanted to know. He had asked his mother what she was making of her life, and his mother had simply answered that she supposed she was making the best of it. Mrs Touchett had not the imagination that communes with the unseen, and she now pretended to no intimacy with her niece, whom she rarely encountered. This young woman appeared to be living in a sufficiently honourable way, but Mrs Touchett still remained of the opinion that her marriage had been a shabby affair. It had given her no pleasure to think of Isabel’s establishment, which she was sure was a very lame business. From time to time, in Florence, she rubbed against the Countess Gemini, doing her best always to minimise the contact; and the Countess reminded her of Osmond, who made her think of Isabel. The Countess was less talked of in these days; but Mrs Touchett augured no good of that: it only proved how she had been talked of before. There was a more direct suggestion of Isabel in the person of Madame Merle; but Madame Merle’s relations with Mrs Touchett had undergone a perceptible change. Isabel’s aunt had told her, without circumlocution, that she had played too ingenious a part; and Madame Merle, who never quarrelled with any one, who appeared to think no one worth it, and who had performed the miracle of living, more or less, for several years with Mrs Touchett and showing no symptom of irritation—Madame Merle now took a very high tone and declared that this was an accusation from which she couldn’t stoop to defend herself. She added, however (without stooping), that her behaviour had been only too simple, that she had believed only what she saw, that she saw Isabel was not eager to marry and Osmond not eager to please (his repeated visits had been nothing; he was boring himself to death on his hill-top and he came merely for amusement). Isabel had kept her sentiments to herself, and her journey to Greece and Egypt had effectually thrown dust in her companion’s eyes. Madame Merle accepted the event—she was unprepared to think of it as a scandal; but that she had played any part in it, double or single, was an imputation against which she proudly protested. It was doubtless in consequence of Mrs Touchett’s attitude, and of the injury it offered to habits consecrated by many charming seasons, that Madame Merle had, after this, chosen to pass many months in England, where her credit was quite unimpaired. Mrs Touchett had done her a wrong; there are some things that can’t be forgiven. But Madame Merle suffered in silence; there was always something exquisite in her dignity.

Ralph, as I say, had wished to see for himself; but while engaged in this pursuit he had yet felt afresh what a fool he had been to put the girl on her guard. He had played the wrong card, and now he had lost the game. He should see nothing, he should learn nothing; for him she would always wear a mask. His true line would have been to profess delight in her union, so that later, when, as Ralph phrased it, the bottom should fall out of it, she might have the pleasure of saying to him that he had been a goose. He would gladly have consented to pass for a goose in order to know Isabel’s real situation. At present, however, she neither taunted him with his fallacies nor pretended that her own confidence was justified; if she wore a mask it completely covered her face. There was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted on it; this was not an expression, Ralph said—it was a representation, it was even an advertisement. She had lost her child; that was a sorrow, but it was a sorrow she scarcely spoke of; there was more to say about it than she could say to Ralph. It belonged to the past, moreover; it had occurred six months before and she had already laid aside the tokens of mourning. She appeared to be leading the life of the world; Ralph heard her spoken of as having a ‘charming position.’ He observed that she produced the impression of being peculiarly enviable, that it was supposed, among many people, to be a privilege even to know her. Her house was not open to every one, and she had an evening in the week to which people were not invited as a matter of course. She lived with a certain magnificence, but you needed to be a member of her circle to perceive it; for there was nothing to gape at, nothing to criticise, nothing even to admire, in the daily proceedings of Mr and Mrs Osmond. Ralph, in all this, recognised the hand of the master; for he knew that Isabel had no faculty for producing studied impressions. She struck him as having a great love of movement, of gaiety, of late hours, of long rides, of fatigue; an eagerness to be entertained, to be interested, even to be bored, to make acquaintances, to see people who were talked

about, to explore the neighbourhood of Rome, to enter into relation with certain of the mustiest relics of its old society. In all this there was much less discrimination than in that desire for comprehensiveness of development on which he had been used to exercise his wit. There was a kind of violence in some of her impulses, of crudity in some of her experiments, which took him by surprise: it seemed to him that she even spoke faster, moved faster, breathed faster, than before her marriage. Certainly she had fallen into exaggerations—she who used to care so much for the pure truth; and whereas of old she had a great delight in good-humoured argument, in intellectual play (she never looked so charming as when in the genial heat of discussion she received a crushing blow full in the face and brushed it away as a feather), she appeared now to think there was nothing worth people's either differing about or agreeing upon. Of old she had been curious, and now she was indifferent, and yet in spite of her indifference her activity was greater than ever. Slender still, but lovelier than before, she had gained no great maturity of aspect; yet there was an amplitude and a brilliancy in her personal arrangements that gave a touch of insolence to her beauty. Poor human-hearted Isabel, what perversity had bitten her? Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament. The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond. 'Good heavens, what a function!' he then woefully exclaimed. He was lost in wonder at the mystery of things.

He recognised Osmond, as I say; he recognised him at every turn. He saw how he kept all things within limits; how he adjusted, regulated, animated their manner of life. Osmond was in his element; at last he had material to work with. He always had an eye to effect, and his effects were deeply calculated. They were produced by no vulgar means, but the motive was as vulgar as the art was great. To surround his interior with a sort of invidious sanctity, to tantalise society with a sense of exclusion, to make people believe his house was different from every other, to impart to the face that he presented to the world a cold originality—this was the ingenious effort of the personage to whom Isabel had attributed a superior morality. 'He works with superior material,' Ralph said to himself; 'it's rich abundance compared with his former resources.' Ralph was a clever man; but Ralph had never—to his own sense—been so clever as when he observed, *in petto*,* that under the guise of caring only for intrinsic values Osmond lived exclusively for the world. Far from being its master as he pretended to be, he was its very humble servant, and the degree of its attention was his only measure of success. He lived with his eye on it from morning till night, and the world was so stupid it never suspected the trick. Everything he did was *pose*—*pose* so subtly considered that if one were not on the lookout one mistook it for impulse. Ralph had never met a man who lived so much in the land of consideration. His tastes, his studies, his accomplishments, his collections, were all for a purpose. His life on his hilltop at Florence had been the conscious attitude of years. His solitude, his ennui, his love for his daughter, his good manners, his bad manners, were so many features of a mental image constantly present to him as a model of impertinence and mystification. His ambition was not to please the world, but to please himself by exciting the world's curiosity and then declining to satisfy it. It had made him feel great, ever, to play the world a trick. The thing he had done in his life most directly to please himself was his marrying Miss Archer; though in this case indeed the gullible world was in a manner embodied in poor Isabel, who had been mystified to the top of her bent. Ralph of course found a fitness in being consistent; he had embraced a creed, and as he had suffered for it he could not in honour forsake it. I give this little sketch of its articles for what they may at the time have been worth. It was certain that he was very skilful in fitting the facts to his theory—even the fact that during the month he spent in Rome at this period the husband of the woman he loved appeared to regard him not in the least as an enemy.

For Gilbert Osmond Ralph had not now that importance. It was not that he had the importance of a friend; it was rather that he had none at all. He was Isabel's cousin and he was rather unpleasantly ill—it was on this basis that Osmond treated with him. He made the proper enquiries, asked about his health, about Mrs Touchett, about his opinion of winter climates, whether he were comfortable at his hotel. He addressed him, on the few occasions of their meeting, not a word that was not necessary; but his manner had always the urbanity proper to conscious success in the presence of conscious failure. For all this, Ralph had had, toward the end, a sharp inward vision of Osmond's making it of small ease to his wife that she should continue to receive Mr Touchett. He was not jealous—he had not that excuse; no one could be jealous of Ralph. But he made Isabel pay for her old-time kindness, of which so much was still left; and as Ralph had no idea of her paying too much, so when his suspicion had become sharp, he had taken himself off. In doing so he had deprived Isabel of a very interesting occupation: she had been constantly wondering what fine principle was keeping him alive. She had decided that it was his love of conversation; his conversation had been better than ever. He had given up walking; he was no longer a

humorous stroller. He sat all day in a chair—almost any chair would serve, and was so dependent on what you would do for him that, had not his talk been highly contemplative, you might have thought he was blind. The reader already knows more about him than Isabel was ever to know, and the reader may therefore be given the key to the mystery. What kept Ralph alive was simply the fact that he had not yet seen enough of the person in the world in whom he was most interested: he was not yet satisfied. There was more to come; he couldn't make up his mind to lose that. He wanted to see what she would make of her husband—or what her husband would make of her. This was only the first act of the drama, and he was determined to sit out the performance. His determination had held good; it had kept him going some eighteen months more, till the time of his return to Rome with Lord Warburton. It had given him indeed such an air of intending to live indefinitely that Mrs Touchett, though more accessible to confusions of thought in the matter of this strange, unremunerative—and unremunerated—son of hers than she had ever been before, had, as we have learned, not scrupled to embark for a distant land. If Ralph had been kept alive by suspense it was with a good deal of the same emotion—the excitement of wondering in what state she should find him—that Isabel mounted to his apartment the day after Lord Warburton had notified her of his arrival in Rome.

She spent an hour with him; it was the first of several visits. Gilbert Osmond called on him punctually, and on their sending their carriage for him Ralph came more than once to Palazzo Roccanera. A fortnight elapsed, at the end of which Ralph announced to Lord Warburton that he thought after all he wouldn't go to Sicily. The two men had been dining together after a day spent by the latter in ranging about the Campagna. They had left the table, and Warburton, before the chimney, was lighting a cigar, which he instantly removed from his lips.

'Won't go to Sicily? Where then will you go?'

'Well, I guess I won't go anywhere,' said Ralph, from the sofa, all shamelessly.

'Do you mean you'll return to England?'

'Oh dear no; I'll stay in Rome.'

'Rome won't do for you. Rome's not warm enough.'

'It will have to do. I'll make it do. See how well I've been.'

Lord Warburton looked at him a while, puffing a cigar and as if trying to see it. 'You've been better than you were on the journey, certainly. I wonder how you lived through that. But I don't understand your condition. I recommend you to try Sicily.'

'I can't try,' said poor Ralph. 'I've done trying. I can't move further. I can't face that journey. Fancy me between Scylla and Charybdis!* I don't want to die on the Sicilian plains—to be snatched away, like Proserpine* in the same locality, to the Plutonian shades.'

'What the deuce then did you come for?' his lordship enquired.

'Because the idea took me. I see it won't do. It really doesn't matter where I am now. I've exhausted all remedies, I've swallowed all climates. As I'm here I'll stay. I haven't a single cousin in Sicily—much less a married one.'

'Your cousin's certainly an inducement. But what does the doctor say?'

'I haven't asked him, and I don't care a fig. If I die here Mrs Osmond will bury me. But I shall not die here.'

'I hope not.' Lord Warburton continued to smoke reflectively. 'Well, I must say,' he resumed, 'for myself I'm very glad you don't insist on Sicily. I had a horror of that journey.'

'Ah, but for you it needn't have mattered. I had no idea of dragging you in my train.'

'I certainly didn't mean to let you go alone.'

'My dear Warburton, I never expected you to come further than this,' Ralph cried.

'I should have gone with you and seen you settled,' said Lord Warburton.

'You're a very good Christian. You're a very kind man.'

'Then I should have come back here.'

'And then you'd have gone to England.'

'No, no; I should have stayed.'

'Well,' said Ralph, 'if that's what we are both up to, I don't see where Sicily comes in!'

His companion was silent; he sat staring at the fire. At last, looking up, 'I say, tell me this,' he broke out; 'did you really mean to go to Sicily when we started?'

'Ah, *vous m'en demandez trop*!* Let me put a question first. Did you come with me quite—

platonically?'

'I don't know what you mean by that. I wanted to come abroad.'

'I suspect we've each been playing our little game.'

'Speak for yourself. I made no secret whatever of my desiring to be here a while.'

'Yes, I remember you said you wished to see the Minister of Foreign Affairs.'

'I've seen him three times. He's very amusing.'

'I think you've forgotten what you came for,' said Ralph.

'Perhaps I have,' his companion answered rather gravely.

These two were gentlemen of a race which is not distinguished by the absence of reserve, and they had travelled together from London to Rome without an allusion to matters that were uppermost in the mind of each. There was an old subject they had once discussed, but it had lost its recognised place in their attention, and even after their arrival in Rome, where many things led back to it, they had kept the same half-diffident, half-confident silence.

'I recommend you to get the doctor's consent, all the same,' Lord Warburton went on, abruptly, after an interval.

'The doctor's consent will spoil it. I never have it when I can help it.'

'What then does Mrs Osmond think?' Ralph's friend demanded.

'I've not told her. She'll probably say that Rome's too cold and even offer to go with me to Catania. She's capable of that.'

'In your place I should like it.'

'Her husband won't like it.'

'Ah well, I can fancy that; though it seems to me you're not bound to mind his likings. They're his affair.'

'I don't want to make any more trouble between them,' said Ralph.

'Is there so much already?'

'There's complete preparation for it. Her going off with me would make the explosion. Osmond isn't fond of his wife's cousin.'

'Then of course he'd make a row. But won't he make a row if you stop here?'

'That's what I want to see. He made one the last time I was in Rome, and then I thought it my duty to disappear. Now I think it's my duty to stop and defend her.'

'My dear Touchett, your defensive powers—!' Lord Warburton began with a smile. But he saw something in his companion's face that checked him. 'Your duty, in these premises, seems to me rather a nice question,' he observed instead.

Ralph for a short time answered nothing. 'It's true my defensive powers are small,' he returned at last; 'but as my aggressive ones are still smaller Osmond may after all not think me worth his gunpowder. At any rate,' he added, 'there are things I'm curious to see.'

'You're sacrificing your health to your curiosity then?'

'I'm not much interested in my health, and I'm deeply interested in Mrs Osmond.'

'So am I. But not as I once was,' Lord Warburton added quickly. This was one of the allusions he had not hitherto found occasion to make.

'Does she strike you as very happy?' Ralph enquired, emboldened by this confidence.

'Well, I don't know; I've hardly thought. She told me the other night she was happy.'

'Ah, she told *you*, of course,' Ralph exclaimed, smiling.

'I don't know that. It seems to me I was rather the sort of person she might have complained to.'

'Complained? She'll never complain. She has done it—what she has done—and she knows it. She'll complain to you least of all. She's very careful.'

'She needn't be. I don't mean to make love to her again.'

'I'm delighted to hear it. There can be no doubt at least of *your* duty.'

'Ah no,' said Lord Warburton gravely; 'none!'

'Permit me to ask,' Ralph went on, 'whether it's to bring out the fact that you don't mean to make love to her that you're so very civil to the little girl?'

Lord Warburton gave a slight start; he got up and stood before the fire, looking at it hard. 'Does that

strike you as very ridiculous?'

'Ridiculous? Not in the least, if you really like her.'

'I think her a delightful little person. I don't know when a girl of that age has pleased me more.'

'She's a charming creature. Ah, she at least is genuine.'

'Of course there's the difference in our ages—more than twenty years.'

'My dear Warburton,' said Ralph, 'are you serious?'

'Perfectly serious—as far as I've got.'

'I'm very glad. And, heaven help us,' cried Ralph, 'how cheeredup old Osmond will be!'

His companion frowned. 'I say, don't spoil it. I shouldn't propose for his daughter to please *him*.'

'He'll have the perversity to be pleased all the same.'

'He's not so fond of me as that,' said his lordship.

'As that? My dear Warburton, the drawback of your position is that people needn't be fond of you at all to wish to be connected with you. Now, with me in such a case, I should have the happy confidence that they loved me.'

Lord Warburton seemed scarcely in the mood for doing justice to general axioms—he was thinking of a special case. 'Do you judge she'll be pleased?'

'The girl herself? Delighted, surely.'

'No, no; I mean Mrs Osmond.'

Ralph looked at him a moment. 'My dear fellow, what has she to do with it?'

'Whatever she chooses. She's very fond of Pansy.'

'Very true—very true.' And Ralph slowly got up. 'It's an interesting question—how far her fondness for Pansy will carry her.' He stood there a moment with his hands in his pockets and rather a clouded brow. 'I hope, you know, that you're very—very sure. The deuce!' he broke off. 'I don't know how to say it.'

'Yes, you do; you know how to say everything.'

'Well, it's awkward. I hope you're sure that among Miss Osmond's merits her being—a—so near her stepmother isn't a leading one?'

'Good heavens, Touchett!' cried Lord Warburton angrily, 'for what do you take me?'

XL

ISABEL had not seen much of Madame Merle since her marriage, this lady having indulged in frequent absences from Rome. At one time she had spent six months in England; at another she had passed a portion of a winter in Paris. She had made numerous visits to distant friends and gave countenance to the idea that for the future she should be a less inveterate Roman than in the past. As she had been inveterate in the past only in the sense of constantly having an apartment in one of the sunniest niches of the Pincian*—an apartment which often stood empty—this suggested a prospect of almost constant absence; a danger which Isabel at one period had been much inclined to deplore. Familiarity had modified in some degree her first impression of Madame Merle, but it had not essentially altered it; there was still much wonder of admiration in it. That personage was armed at all points; it was a pleasure to see a character so completely equipped for the social battle. She carried her flag discreetly, but her weapons were polished steel, and she used them with a skill which struck Isabel as more and more that of a veteran. She was never weary, never overcome with disgust; she never appeared to need rest or consolation. She had her own ideas; she had of old exposed a great many of them to Isabel, who knew also that under an appearance of extreme self-control her highly-cultivated friend concealed a rich sensibility. But her will was mistress of her life; there was something gallant in the way she kept going. It was as if she had learned the secret of it—as if the art of life were some clever trick she had guessed. Isabel, as she herself grew older, became acquainted with revulsions, with disgusts; there were days when the world looked black and she asked herself with some sharpness what it was that she was pretending to live for. Her old habit had been to live by enthusiasm, to fall in love with suddenly-perceived possibilities, with the idea of some new adventure. As a younger person she had been used to proceed from one little exaltation to the other; there were scarcely any dull places between. But Madame Merle had suppressed enthusiasm; she fell in love now-a–days with nothing; she lived entirely by reason and by wisdom. There were hours when Isabel would have given anything for lessons in this art; if her brilliant friend had been near she would have made an appeal to her. She had become aware more than before of the advantage of being like that—of having made one's self a firm surface, a sort of corselet of silver.

But, as I say, it was not till the winter during which we lately renewed acquaintance with our heroine that the personage in question made again a continuous stay in Rome. Isabel now saw more of her than she had done since her marriage; but by this time Isabel's needs and inclinations had considerably changed. It was not at present to Madame Merle that she would have applied for instruction; she had lost the desire to know this lady's clever trick. If she had troubles she must keep them to herself, and if life was difficult it would not make it easier to confess herself beaten. Madame Merle was doubtless of great use to herself and an ornament to any circle; but was she—would she be—of use to others in periods of refined embarrassment? The best way to profit by her friend—this indeed Isabel had always thought—was to imitate her, to be as firm and bright as she. She recognised no embarrassments, and Isabel, considering this fact, determined for the fiftieth time to brush aside her own. It seemed to her too, on the renewal of an intercourse which had virtually been interrupted, that her old ally was different, was almost detached—pushing to the extreme a certain rather artificial fear of being indiscreet. Ralph Touchett, we know, had been of the opinion that she was prone to exaggeration, to forcing the note—was apt, in the vulgar phrase, to overdo it. Isabel had never admitted this charge—had never indeed quite understood it; Madame Merle's conduct, to her perception, always bore the stamp of good taste, was always 'quiet.' But in this matter of not wishing to intrude upon the inner life of the Osmond family it at last occurred to our young woman that she overdid a little. That of course was not the best taste; that was rather violent. She remembered too much that Isabel was married; that she had now other interests; that though she, Madame Merle, had known Gilbert Osmond and his little Pansy very well, better almost than any one, she was not after all of the inner circle. She was on her guard; she never spoke of their affairs till she was asked, even pressed—when her opinion was wanted; she had a dread of seeming to meddle. Madame Merle was as candid as we know, and one day she candidly expressed this dread to Isabel.

'I *must* be on my guard,' she said; 'I might so easily, without suspecting it, offend you. You would be right to be offended, even if my intention should have been of the purest. I must not forget that I knew your husband long before you did; I must not let that betray me. If you were a silly woman you might be jealous. You're not a silly woman; I know that perfectly. But neither am I; therefore I'm determined not to get into trouble. A little harm's very soon done; a mistake's made before one knows it. Of course if I had

wished to make love to your husband I had ten years to do it in, and nothing to prevent; so it isn't likely I shall begin to-day, when I'm so much less attractive than I was. But if I were to annoy you by seeming to take a place that doesn't belong to me, you wouldn't make that reflection; you'd simply say I was forgetting certain differences. I'm determined not to forget them. Certainly a good friend isn't always thinking of that; one doesn't suspect one's friends of injustice. I don't suspect you, my dear, in the least; but I suspect human nature. Don't think I make myself uncomfortable; I'm not always watching myself. I think I sufficiently prove it in talking to you as I do now. All I wish to say is, however, that if you were to be jealous—that's the form it would take—I should be sure to think it was a little my fault. It certainly wouldn't be your husband's.'

Isabel had had three years to think over Mrs Touchett's theory that Madame Merle had made Gilbert Osmond's marriage. We know how she had at first received it. Madame Merle might have made Gilbert Osmond's marriage, but she certainly had not made Isabel Archer's. That was the work of—Isabel scarcely knew what: of nature, providence, fortune, of the eternal mystery of things. It was true her aunt's complaint had been not so much of Madame Merle's activity as of her duplicity: she had brought about the strange event and then she had denied her guilt. Such guilt would not have been great, to Isabel's mind; she couldn't make a crime of Madame Merle's having been the producing cause of the most important friendship she had ever formed. This had occurred to her just before her marriage, after her little discussion with her aunt and at a time when she was still capable of that large inward reference, the tone almost of the philosophic historian, to her scant young annals. If Madame Merle had desired her change of state she could only say it had been a very happy thought. With her, moreover, she had been perfectly straightforward; she had never concealed her high opinion of Gilbert Osmond. After their union Isabel discovered that her husband took a less convenient view of the matter; he seldom consented to finger, in talk, this roundest and smoothest bead of their social rosary.

'Don't you like Madame Merle?' Isabel had once said to him. 'She thinks a great deal of you.'

'I'll tell you once for all,' Osmond had answered. 'I liked her once better than I do to-day. I'm tired of her, and I'm rather ashamed of it. She's so almost unnaturally good! I'm glad she's not in Italy; it makes for relaxation—for a sort of moral *détente*.* Don't talk of her too much; it seems to bring her back. She'll come back in plenty of time.'

Madame Merle, in fact, had come back before it was too late—too late, I mean, to recover whatever advantage she might have lost. But meantime, if, as I have said, she was sensibly different, Isabel's feelings were also not quite the same. Her consciousness of the situation was as acute as of old, but it was much less satisfying. A dissatisfied mind, whatever else it may miss, is rarely in want of reasons; they bloom as thick as buttercups in June. The fact of Madame Merle's having had a hand in Gilbert Osmond's marriage ceased to be one of her titles to consideration; it might have been written, after all, that there was not so much to thank her for. As time went on there was less and less, and Isabel once said to herself that perhaps without her these things would not have been. That reflection indeed was instantly stifled; she knew an immediate horror at having made it. 'Whatever happens to me let me not be unjust,' she said; 'let me bear my burdens myself and not shift them upon others!' This disposition was tested, eventually, by that ingenious apology for her present conduct which Madame Merle saw fit to make and of which I have given a sketch; for there was something irritating—there was almost an air of mockery—in her neat discriminations and clear convictions. In Isabel's mind to-day there was nothing clear; there was a confusion of regrets, a complication of fears. She felt helpless as she turned away from her friend, who had just made the statements I have quoted: Madame Merle knew so little what she was thinking of! She was herself moreover so unable to explain. Jealous of her—jealous of her with Gilbert? The idea just then suggested no near reality. She almost wished jealousy had been possible; it would have made in a manner for refreshment. Wasn't it in a manner one of the symptoms of happiness? Madame Merle, however, was wise, so wise that she might have been pretending to know Isabel better than Isabel knew herself. This young woman had always been fertile in resolutions—many of them of an elevated character; but at no period had they flourished (in the privacy of her heart) more richly than today. It is true that they all had a family likeness; they might have been summed up in the determination that if she was to be unhappy it should not be by a fault of her own. Her poor winged spirit had always had a great desire to do its best, and it had not as yet been seriously discouraged. It wished, therefore, to hold fast to justice—not to pay itself by petty revenges. To associate Madame Merle with its disappointment would be a petty revenge—especially as the pleasure to be derived from that would be perfectly insincere. It might feed her sense of bitterness, but it would not loosen her bonds. It was impossible to pretend that she had not acted with her eyes open; if ever a girl was a free agent she had been. A girl in love was doubtless not a free agent; but the sole source of her mistake had been within herself. There had been no plot, no snare; she had looked and considered and chosen. When a woman had made such a mistake, there was only one

way to repair it—just immensely (oh, with the highest grandeur!) to accept it. One folly was enough, especially when it was to last for ever; a second one would not much set it off. In this vow of reticence there was a certain nobleness which kept Isabel going; but Madame Merle had been right, for all that, in taking her precautions.

One day about a month after Ralph Touchett's arrival in Rome Isabel came back from a walk with Pansy. It was not only a part of her general determination to be just that she was at present very thankful for Pansy—it was also a part of her tenderness for things that were pure and weak. Pansy was dear to her, and there was nothing else in her life that had the rightness of the young creature's attachment or the sweetness of her own clearness about it. It was like a soft presence—like a small hand in her own; on Pansy's part it was more than an affection—it was a kind of ardent coercive faith. On her own side her sense of the girl's dependence was more than a pleasure; it operated as a definite reason when motives threatened to fail her. She had said to herself that we must take our duty where we find it, and that we must look for it as much as possible. Pansy's sympathy was a direct admonition; it seemed to say that here was an opportunity, not eminent perhaps, but unmistakeable. Yet an opportunity for what Isabel could hardly have said; in general, to be more for the child than the child was able to be for herself. Isabel could have smiled, in these days, to remember that her little companion had once been ambiguous, for she now perceived that Pansy's ambiguities were simply her own grossness of vision. She had been unable to believe any one could care so much—so extraordinarily much—to please. But since then she had seen this delicate faculty in operation, and now she knew what to think of it. It was the whole creature—it was a sort of genius. Pansy had no pride to interfere with it, and though she was constantly extending her conquests she took no credit for them. The two were constantly together; Mrs Osmond was rarely seen without her stepdaughter. Isabel liked her company; it had the effect of one's carrying a nosegay composed all of the same flower. And then not to neglect Pansy, not under any provocation to neglect her—this she had made an article of religion. The young girl had every appearance of being happier in Isabel's society than in that of any one save her father, whom she admired with an intensity justified by the fact that, as paternity was an exquisite pleasure to Gilbert Osmond, he had always been luxuriously mild. Isabel knew how Pansy liked to be with her and how she studied the means of pleasing her. She had decided that the best way of pleasing her was negative, and consisted in not giving her trouble—a conviction which certainly could have had no reference to trouble already existing. She was therefore ingeniously passive and almost imaginatively docile; she was careful even to moderate the eagerness with which she assented to Isabel's propositions and which might have implied that she could have thought otherwise. She never interrupted, never asked social questions, and though she delighted in approbation, to the point of turning pale when it came to her, never held out her hand for it. She only looked toward it wistfully—an attitude which, as she grew older, made her eyes the prettiest in the world. When during the second winter at Palazzo Roccanera she began to go to parties, to dances, she always, at a reasonable hour, lest Mrs Osmond should be tired, was the first to propose departure. Isabel appreciated the sacrifice of the late dances, for she knew her little companion had a passionate pleasure in this exercise, taking her steps to the music like a conscientious fairy. Society, moreover, had no drawbacks for her; she liked even the tiresome parts—the heat of ballrooms, the dulness of dinners, the crush at the door, the awkward waiting for the carriage. During the day, in this vehicle, beside her stepmother, she sat in a small fixed, appreciative posture, bending forward and faintly smiling, as if she had been taken to drive for the first time.

On the day I speak of they had been driven out of one of the gates of the city and at the end of half an hour had left the carriage to await them by the roadside while they walked away over the short grass of the Campagna, which even in the winter months is sprinkled with delicate flowers. This was almost a daily habit with Isabel, who was fond of a walk and had a swift length of step, though not so swift a one as on her first coming to Europe. It was not the form of exercise that Pansy loved best, but she liked it, because she liked everything; and she moved with a shorter undulation beside her father's wife, who afterwards, on their return to Rome, paid a tribute to her preferences by making the circuit of the Pincian or the Villa Borghese. She had gathered a handful of flowers in a sunny hollow, far from the walls of Rome, and on reaching Palazzo Roccanera she went straight to her room, to put them into water. Isabel passed into the drawingroom, the one she herself usually occupied, the second in order from the large ante-chamber which was entered from the staircase and in which even Gilbert Osmond's rich devices had not been able to correct a look of rather grand nudity. Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she interrupted it. Madame Merle was there in her bonnet, and Gilbert Osmond was talking to her; for a minute they were unaware she had come in. Isabel had often

seen that before, certainly; but what she had not seen, or at least had not noticed, was that their colloquy had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them. Madame Merle was standing on the rug, a little way from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back and looking at her. Her head was erect, as usual, but her eyes were bent on his. What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived that they had arrived at a desultory pause in their exchange of ideas and were musing, face to face, with the freedom of old friends who sometimes exchange ideas without uttering them. There was nothing to shock in this; they were old friends in fact. But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it. Madame Merle had seen her and had welcomed her without moving; her husband, on the other hand, had instantly jumped up. He presently murmured something about wanting a walk and, after having asked their visitor to excuse him, left the room.

'I came to see you, thinking you would have come in; and as you hadn't I waited for you,' Madame Merle said.

'Didn't he ask you to sit down?' Isabel asked with a smile.

Madame Merle looked about her. 'Ah, it's very true; I was going away.'

'You must stay now.'

'Certainly. I came for a reason; I've something on my mind.'

'I've told you that before,' Isabel said—'that it takes something extraordinary to bring you to this house.'

'And you know what I've told *you*; that whether I come or whether I stay away, I've always the same motive—the affection I bear you.'

'Yes, you've told me that.'

'You look just now as if you didn't believe it,' said Madame Merle.

'Ah,' Isabel answered, 'the profundity of your motives, that's the last thing I doubt!'

'You doubt sooner of the sincerity of my words.'

Isabel shook her head gravely. 'I know you've always been kind to me.'

'As often as you would let me. You don't always take it; then one has to let you alone. It's not to do you a kindness, however, that I've come to-day; it's quite another affair. I've come to get rid of a trouble of my own—to make it over to you. I've been talking to your husband about it.'

'I'm surprised at that; he doesn't like troubles.'

'Especially other people's; I know very well. But neither do you, I suppose. At any rate, whether you do or not, you must help me. It's about poor Mr Rosier.'

'Ah,' said Isabel reflectively, 'it's his trouble then, not yours.'

'He has succeeded in saddling me with it. He comes to see me ten times a week, to talk about Pansy.'

'Yes, he wants to marry her. I know all about it.'

Madame Merle hesitated. 'I gathered from your husband that perhaps you didn't.'

'How should he know what I know? He has never spoken to me of the matter.'

'It's probably because he doesn't know how to speak of it.'

'It's nevertheless the sort of question in which he's rarely at fault.'

'Yes, because as a general thing he knows perfectly well what to think. To-day he doesn't.'

'Haven't you been telling him?' Isabel asked.

Madame Merle gave a bright, voluntary smile. 'Do you know you're a little dry?'

'Yes; I can't help it. Mr Rosier has also talked to me.'

'In that there's some reason. You're so near the child.'

'Ah,' said Isabel, 'for all the comfort I've given him! If you think me dry, I wonder what *he* thinks.'

'I believe he thinks you can do more than you have done.'

'I can do nothing.'

'You can do more at least than I. I don't know what mysterious connection he may have discovered between me and Pansy; but he came to me from the first, as if I held his fortune in my hand. Now he keeps coming back, to spur me up, to know what hope there is, to pour out his feelings.'

'He's very much in love,' said Isabel.

‘Very much—for him.’

‘Very much for Pansy, you might say as well.’

Madame Merle dropped her eyes a moment. ‘Don’t you think she’s attractive?’

‘The dearest little person possible—but very limited.’

‘She ought to be all the easier for Mr Rosier to love. Mr Rosier’s not unlimited.’

‘No,’ said Isabel, ‘he has about the extent of one’s pockethandkerchief—the small ones with lace borders.’ Her humour had lately turned a good deal to sarcasm, but in a moment she was ashamed of exercising it on so innocent an object as Pansy’s suitor. ‘He’s very kind, very honest,’ she presently added; ‘and he’s not such a fool as he seems.’

‘He assures me that she delights in him,’ said Madame Merle.

‘I don’t know; I’ve not asked her.’

‘You’ve never sounded her a little?’

‘It’s not my place; it’s her father’s.’

‘Ah, you’re too literal!’ said Madame Merle.

‘I must judge for myself.’

Madame Merle gave her smile again. ‘It isn’t easy to help you.’

‘To help me?’ said Isabel very seriously. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s easy to displease you. Don’t you see how wise I am to be careful? I notify you, at any rate, as I notified Osmond, that I wash my hands of the love-affairs of Miss Pansy and Mr Edward Rosier. *Je n’y peux rien, moi!** I can’t talk to Pansy about him. Especially,’ added Madame Merle, ‘as I don’t think him a paragon of husbands.’

Isabel reflected a little; after which, with a smile, ‘You don’t wash your hands then!’ she said. After which again she added in another tone: ‘You can’t—you’re too much interested.’

Madame Merle slowly rose; she had given Isabel a look as rapid as the intimation that had gleamed before our heroine a few moments before. Only this time the latter saw nothing. ‘Ask him the next time, and you’ll see.’

‘I can’t ask him; he has ceased to come to the house. Gilbert has let him know that he’s not welcome.’

‘Ah yes,’ said Madame Merle, ‘I forgot that—though it’s the burden of his lamentation. He says Osmond has insulted him. All the same,’ she went on, ‘Osmond doesn’t dislike him so much as he thinks.’ She had got up as if to close the conversation, but she lingered, looking about her, and had evidently more to say. Isabel perceived this and even saw the point she had in view; but Isabel also had her own reasons for not opening the way.

‘That must have pleased him, if you’ve told him,’ she answered, smiling.

‘Certainly I’ve told him; as far as that goes I’ve encouraged him. I’ve preached patience, have said that his case isn’t desperate if he’ll only hold his tongue and be quiet. Unfortunately he has taken it into his head to be jealous.’

‘Jealous?’

‘Jealous of Lord Warburton, who, he says, is always here.’

Isabel, who was tired, had remained sitting; but at this she also rose. ‘Ah!’ she exclaimed simply, moving slowly to the fireplace.

Madame Merle observed her as she passed and while she stood a moment before the mantel-glass and pushed into its place a wandering tress of hair.

‘Poor Mr Rosier keeps saying there’s nothing impossible in Lord Warburton’s falling in love with Pansy,’ Madame Merle went on.

Isabel was silent a little; she turned away from the glass. ‘It’s true—there’s nothing impossible,’ she returned at last, gravely and more gently.

‘So I’ve had to admit to Mr Rosier. So, too, your husband thinks.’

‘That I don’t know.’

‘Ask him and you’ll see.’

‘I shall not ask him,’ said Isabel.

‘Pardon me; I forgot you had pointed that out. Of course,’ Madame Merle added, ‘you’ve had infinitely more observation of Lord Warburton’s behaviour than I.’

‘I see no reason why I shouldn’t tell you that he likes my stepdaughter very much.’

Madame Merle gave one of her quick looks again. ‘Likes her, you mean—as Mr Rosier means?’

‘I don’t know how Mr Rosier means; but Lord Warburton has let me know that he’s charmed with Pansy.’

‘And you’ve never told Osmond?’ This observation was immediate, precipitate; it almost burst from Madame Merle’s lips.

Isabel’s eyes rested on her. ‘I suppose he’ll know in time; Lord Warburton has a tongue and knows how to express himself.’

Madame Merle instantly became conscious that she had spoken more quickly than usual, and the reflection brought the colour to her cheek. She gave the treacherous impulse time to subside and then said as if she had been thinking it over a little: ‘That would be better than marrying poor Mr Rosier.’

‘Much better, I think.’

‘It would be very delightful; it would be a great marriage. It’s really very kind of him.’

‘Very kind of him?’

‘To drop his eyes on a simple little girl.’

‘I don’t see that.’

‘It’s very good of you. But after all, Pansy Osmond—’

‘After all, Pansy Osmond’s the most attractive person he has ever known!’ Isabel exclaimed.

Madame Merle stared, and indeed she was justly bewildered. ‘Ah, a moment ago I thought you seemed rather to disparage her.’

‘I said she was limited. And so she is. And so’s Lord Warburton.’

‘So are we all, if you come to that. If it’s no more than Pansy deserves, all the better. But if she fixes her affections on Mr Rosier I won’t admit that she deserves it. That will be too perverse.’

‘Mr Rosier’s a nuisance!’ Isabel cried abruptly.

‘I quite agree with you, and I’m delighted to know that I’m not expected to feed his flame. For the future, when he calls on me, my door shall be closed to him.’ And gathering her mantle together Madame Merle prepared to depart. She was checked, however, on her progress to the door, by an inconsequent request from Isabel.

‘All the same, you know, be kind to him.’

She lifted her shoulders and eyebrows and stood looking at her friend. ‘I don’t understand your contradictions! Decidedly I shan’t be kind to him, for it will be a false kindness. I want to see her married to Lord Warburton.’

‘You had better wait till he asks her.’

‘If what you say’s true, he’ll ask her. Especially,’ said Madame Merle in a moment, ‘if you make him.’

‘If I make him?’

‘It’s quite in your power. You’ve great influence with him.’

Isabel frowned a little. ‘Where did you learn that?’

‘Mrs Touchett told me. Not you—never!’ said Madame Merle, smiling.

‘I certainly never told you anything of the sort.’

‘You *might* have done—so far as opportunity went—when we were by way of being confidential with each other. But you really told me very little; I’ve often thought so since.’

Isabel had thought so too, and sometimes with a certain satisfaction. But she didn’t admit it now—perhaps because she wished not to appear to exult in it. ‘You seem to have had an excellent informant in my aunt,’ she simply returned.

‘She let me know you had declined an offer of marriage from Lord Warburton, because she was greatly vexed and was full of the subject. Of course I think you’ve done better in doing as you did. But if you wouldn’t marry Lord Warburton yourself, make him the reparation of helping him to marry some one else.’

Isabel listened to this with a face that persisted in not reflecting the bright expressiveness of Madame Merle’s. But in a moment she said, reasonably and gently enough: ‘I should be very glad indeed if, as regards Pansy, it could be arranged.’ Upon which her companion, who seemed to regard this as a speech of good omen, embraced her more tenderly than might have been expected and triumphantly withdrew.

XLI

OSMOND touched on this matter that evening for the first time; coming very late into the drawing-room, where she was sitting alone. They had spent the evening at home, and Pansy had gone to bed; he himself had been sitting since dinner in a small apartment in which he had arranged his books and which he called his study. At ten o'clock Lord Warburton had come in, as he always did when he knew from Isabel that she was to be at home; he was going somewhere else and he sat for half an hour. Isabel, after asking him for news of Ralph, said very little to him, on purpose; she wished him to talk with her stepdaughter. She pretended to read; she even went after a little to the piano; she asked herself if she mightn't leave the room. She had come little by little to think well of the idea of Pansy's becoming the wife of the master of beautiful Lockleigh, though at first it had not presented itself in a manner to excite her enthusiasm. Madame Merle, that afternoon, had applied the match to an accumulation of inflammable material. When Isabel was unhappy she always looked about her—partly from impulse and partly by theory—for some form of positive exertion. She could never rid herself of the sense that unhappiness was a state of disease —of suffering as opposed to doing. To 'do'—it hardly mattered what—would therefore be an escape, perhaps in some degree a remedy. Besides, she wished to convince herself that she had done everything possible to content her husband; she was determined not to be haunted by visions of his wife's limpness under appeal. It would please him greatly to see Pansy married to an English nobleman, and justly please him, since this nobleman was so sound a character. It seemed to Isabel that if she could make it her duty to bring about such an event she should play the part of a good wife. She wanted to be that; she wanted to be able to believe sincerely, and with proof of it, that she had been that. Then such an undertaking had other recommendations. It would occupy her, and she desired occupation. It would even amuse her, and if she could really amuse herself she perhaps might be saved. Lastly, it would be a service to Lord Warburton, who evidently pleased himself greatly with the charming girl. It was a little 'weird' he should —being what he was; but there was no accounting for such impressions. Pansy might captivate any one—any one at least but Lord Warburton. Isabel would have thought her too small, too slight, perhaps even too artificial for that. There was always a little of the doll about her, and that was not what he had been looking for. Still, who could say what men ever were looking for? They looked for what they found; they knew what pleased them only when they saw it. No theory was valid in such matters, and nothing was more unaccountable or more natural than anything else. If he had cared for *her* it might seem odd he should care for Pansy, who was so different; but he had not cared for her so much as he had supposed. Or if he had, he had completely got over it, and it was natural that, as that affair had failed, he should think something of quite another sort might succeed. Enthusiasm, as I say, had not come at first to Isabel, but it came to-day and made her feel almost happy. It was astonishing what happiness she could still find in the idea of procuring a pleasure for her husband. It was a pity, however, that Edward Rosier had crossed their path!

At this reflection the light that had suddenly gleamed upon that path lost something of its brightness. Isabel was unfortunately as sure that Pansy thought Mr Rosier the nicest of all the young men—as sure as if she had held an interview with her on the subject. It was very tiresome she should be so sure, when she had carefully abstained from informing herself; almost as tiresome as that poor Mr Rosier should have taken it into his own head. He was certainly very inferior to Lord Warburton. It was not the difference in fortune so much as the difference in the men; the young American was really so light a weight. He was much more of the type of the useless fine gentleman than the English nobleman. It was true that there was no particular reason why Pansy should marry a statesman; still, if a statesman admired her, that was his affair, and she would make a perfect little pearl of a peeress.

It may seem to the reader that Mrs Osmond had grown of a sudden strangely cynical, for she ended by saying to herself that this difficulty could probably be arranged. An impediment that was embodied in poor Rosier could not anyhow present itself as a dangerous one; there were always means of levelling secondary obstacles. Isabel was perfectly aware that she had not taken the measure of Pansy's tenacity, which might prove to be inconveniently great; but she inclined to see her as rather letting go, under suggestion, than as clutching under deprecation—since she had certainly the faculty of assent developed in a very much higher degree than that of protest. She would cling, yes, she would cling; but it really mattered to her very little what she clung to. Lord Warburton would do as well as Mr Rosier—especially as she seemed quite to like him; she had expressed this sentiment to Isabel without a single reservation;

she had said she thought his conversation most interesting—he had told her all about India. His manner to Pansy had been of the rightest and easiest—Isabel noticed that for herself, as she also observed that he talked to her not in the least in a patronising way, reminding himself of her youth and simplicity, but quite as if she understood his subjects with that sufficiency with which she followed those of the fashionable operas. This went far enough for attention to the music and the barytone. He was careful only to be kind—he was as kind as he had been to another fluttered young chit at Gardencourt. A girl might well be touched by that; she remembered how she herself had been touched, and said to herself that if she had been as simple as Pansy the impression would have been deeper still. She had not been simple when she refused him; that operation had been as complicated as, later, her acceptance of Osmond had been. Pansy, however, in spite of her simplicity, really did understand, and was glad that Lord Warburton should talk to her, not about her partners and bouquets, but about the state of Italy, the condition of the peasantry, the famous grist-tax, the *pellagra*,* his impressions of Roman society. She looked at him, as she drew her needle through her tapestry, with sweet submissive eyes, and when she lowered them she gave little quiet oblique glances at his person, his hands, his feet, his clothes, as if she were considering him. Even his person, Isabel might have reminded her, was better than Mr Rosier's. But Isabel contented herself at such moments with wondering where this gentleman was; he came no more at all to Palazzo Roccanera. It was surprising, as I say, the hold it had taken of her—the idea of assisting her husband to be pleased.

It was surprising for a variety of reasons which I shall presently touch upon. On the evening I speak of, while Lord Warburton sat there, she had been on the point of taking the great step of going out of the room and leaving her companions alone. I say the great step, because it was in this light that Gilbert Osmond would have regarded it, and Isabel was trying as much as possible to take her husband's view. She succeeded after a fashion, but she fell short of the point I mention. After all she couldn't rise to it; something held her and made this impossible. It was not exactly that it would be base or insidious; for women as a general thing practise such manœuvres with a perfectly good conscience, and Isabel was instinctively much more true than false to the common genius of her sex. There was a vague doubt that interposed—a sense that she was not quite sure. So she remained in the drawing-room, and after a while Lord Warburton went off to his party, of which he promised to give Pansy a full account on the morrow. After he had gone she wondered if she had prevented something which would have happened if she had absented herself for a quarter of an hour; and then she pronounced—always mentally—that when their distinguished visitor should wish her to go away he would easily find means to let her know it. Pansy said nothing whatever about him after he had gone, and Isabel studiously said nothing, as she had taken a vow of reserve until after he should have declared himself. He was a little longer in coming to this than might seem to accord with the description he had given Isabel of his feelings. Pansy went to bed, and Isabel had to admit that she could not now guess what her stepdaughter was thinking of. Her transparent little companion was for the moment not to be seen through.

She remained alone, looking at the fire, until, at the end of half an hour, her husband came in. He moved about a while in silence and then sat down; he looked at the fire like herself. But she now had transferred her eyes from the flickering flame in the chimney to Osmond's face, and she watched him while he kept his silence. Covert observation had become a habit with her; an instinct, of which it is not an exaggeration to say that it was allied to that of self-defence, had made it habitual. She wished as much as possible to know his thoughts, to know what he would say, beforehand, so that she might prepare her answer. Preparing answers had not been her strong point of old; she had rarely in this respect got further than thinking afterwards of clever things she might have said. But she had learned caution—learned it in a measure from her husband's very countenance. It was the same face she had looked into with eyes equally earnest perhaps, but less penetrating, on the terrace of a Florentine villa; except that Osmond had grown slightly stouter since his marriage. He still, however, might strike one as very distinguished.

'Has Lord Warburton been here?' he presently asked.

'Yes, he stayed half an hour.'

'Did he see Pansy?'

'Yes; he sat on the sofa beside her.'

'Did he talk with her much?'

'He talked almost only to her.'

'It seems to me he's attentive. Isn't that what you call it?'

'I don't call it anything,' said Isabel; 'I've waited for you to give it a name.'

'That's a consideration you don't always show,' Osmond answered after a moment.

‘I’ve determined, this time, to try and act as you’d like. I’ve so often failed of that.’

Osmond turned his head slowly, looking at her. ‘Are you trying to quarrel with me?’

‘No, I’m trying to live at peace.’

‘Nothing’s more easy; you know I don’t quarrel myself.’

‘What do you call it when you try to make me angry?’ Isabel asked.

‘I don’t try; if I’ve done so it has been the most natural thing in the world. Moreover I’m not in the least trying now.’

Isabel smiled. ‘It doesn’t matter. I’ve determined never to be angry again.’

‘That’s an excellent resolve. Your temper isn’t good.’

‘No—it’s not good.’ She pushed away the book she had been reading and took up the band of tapestry Pansy had left on the table.

‘That’s partly why I’ve not spoken to you about this business of my daughter’s,’ Osmond said, designating Pansy in the manner that was most frequent with him. ‘I was afraid I should encounter opposition—that you too would have views on the subject. I’ve sent little Rosier about his business.’

‘You were afraid I’d plead for Mr Rosier? Haven’t you noticed that I’ve never spoken to you of him?’

‘I’ve never given you a chance. We’ve so little conversation in these days. I know he was an old friend of yours.’

‘Yes; he’s an old friend of mine.’ Isabel cared little more for him than for the tapestry that she held in her hand; but it was true that he was an old friend and that with her husband she felt a desire not to extenuate such ties. He had a way of expressing contempt for them which fortified her loyalty to them, even when, as in the present case, they were in themselves insignificant. She sometimes felt a sort of passion of tenderness for memories which had no other merit than that they belonged to her unmarried life. ‘But as regards Pansy,’ she added in a moment, ‘I’ve given him no encouragement.’

‘That’s fortunate,’ Osmond observed.

‘Fortunate for me, I suppose you mean. For him it matters little.’

‘There’s no use talking of him,’ Osmond said. ‘As I tell you, I’ve turned him out.’

‘Yes; but a lover outside’s always a lover. He’s sometimes even more of one. Mr Rosier still has hope.’

‘He’s welcome to the comfort of it! My daughter has only to sit perfectly quiet to become Lady Warburton.’

‘Should you like that?’ Isabel asked with a simplicity which was not so affected as it may appear. She was resolved to assume nothing, for Osmond had a way of unexpectedly turning her assumptions against her. The intensity with which he would like his daughter to become Lady Warburton had been the very basis of her own recent reflections. But that was for herself; she would recognise nothing until Osmond should have put it into words; she would not take for granted with him that he thought Lord Warburton a prize worth an amount of effort that was unusual among the Osmonds. It was Gilbert’s constant intimation that for him nothing in life was a prize; that he treated as from equal to equal with the most distinguished people in the world, and that his daughter had only to look about her to pick out a prince. It cost him therefore a lapse from consistency to say explicitly that he yearned for Lord Warburton and that if this nobleman should escape his equivalent might not be found; with which moreover it was another of his customary implications that he was never inconsistent. He would have liked his wife to glide over the point. But strangely enough, now that she was face to face with him and although an hour before she had almost invented a scheme for pleasing him, Isabel was not accommodating, would not glide. And yet she knew exactly the effect on his mind of her question: it would operate as an humiliation. Never mind; he was terribly capable of humiliating *her*—all the more so that he was also capable of waiting for great opportunities and of showing sometimes an almost unaccountable indifference to small ones. Isabel perhaps took a small opportunity because she would not have availed herself of a great one.

Osmond at present acquitted himself very honourably. ‘I should like it extremely; it would be a great marriage. And then Lord Warburton has another advantage: he’s an old friend of yours. It would be pleasant for him to come into the family. It’s very odd Pansy’s admirers should all be your old friends.’

‘It’s natural that they should come to see me. In coming to see me they see Pansy. Seeing her it’s natural they should fall in love with her.’

‘So I think. But you’re not bound to do so.’

‘If she should marry Lord Warburton I should be very glad,’ Isabel went on frankly. ‘He’s an excellent man. You say, however, that she has only to sit perfectly still. Perhaps she won’t sit perfectly still. If she

loses Mr Rosier she may jump up!'

Osmond appeared to give no heed to this; he sat gazing at the fire. 'Pansy would like to be a great lady,' he remarked in a moment with a certain tenderness of tone. 'She wishes above all to please,' he added.

'To please Mr Rosier, perhaps.'

'No, to please me.'

'Me too a little, I think,' said Isabel.

'Yes, she has a great opinion of you. But she'll do what I like.'

'If you're sure of that, it's very well,' she went on.

'Meantime,' said Osmond, 'I should like our distinguished visitor to speak.'

'He has spoken—to me. He has told me it would be a great pleasure to him to believe she could care for him.'

Osmond turned his head quickly, but at first he said nothing. Then, 'Why didn't you tell me that?' he asked sharply.

'There was no opportunity. You know how we live. I've taken the first chance that has offered.'

'Did you speak to him of Rosier?'

'Oh yes, a little.'

'That was hardly necessary.'

'I thought it best he should know, so that, so that—' And Isabel paused.

'So that what?'

'So that he might act accordingly.'

'So that he might back out, do you mean?'

'No, so that he might advance while there's yet time.'

'That's not the effect it seems to have had.'

'You should have patience,' said Isabel. 'You know Englishmen are shy.'

'This one's not. He was not when he made love to *you*.'

She had been afraid Osmond would speak of that; it was disagreeable to her. 'I beg your pardon; he was extremely so,' she returned.

He answered nothing for some time; he took up a book and fingered the pages while she sat silent and occupied herself with Pansy's tapestry. 'You must have a great deal of influence with him,' Osmond went on at last. 'The moment you really wish it you can bring him to the point.'

This was more offensive still; but she felt the great naturalness of his saying it, and it was after all extremely like what she had said to herself. 'Why should I have influence?' she asked. 'What have I ever done to put him under an obligation to me?'

'You refused to marry him,' said Osmond with his eyes on his book.

'I must not presume too much on that,' she replied.

He threw down the book presently and got up, standing before the fire with his hands behind him. 'Well, I hold that it lies in your hands. I shall leave it there. With a little good-will you may manage it. Think that over and remember how much I count on you.' He waited a little, to give her time to answer; but she answered nothing, and he presently strolled out of the room.

XLII

SHE had answered nothing because his words had put the situation before her and she was absorbed in looking at it. There was something in them that suddenly made vibrations deep,* so that she had been afraid to trust herself to speak. After he had gone she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes; and for a long time, far into the night and still further, she sat in the still drawing-room, given up to her meditation. A servant came in to attend to the fire, and she bade him bring fresh candles and then go to bed. Osmond had told her to think of what he had said; and she did so indeed, and of many other things. The suggestion from another that she had a definite influence on Lord Warburton—this had given her the start that accompanies unexpected recognition. Was it true that there was something still between them that might be a handle to make him declare himself to Pansy—a susceptibility, on his part, to approval, a desire to do what would please her? Isabel had hitherto not asked herself the question, because she had not been forced; but now that it was directly presented to her she saw the answer, and the answer frightened her. Yes, there was something—something on Lord Warburton's part. When he had first come to Rome she believed the link that united them to be completely snapped; but little by little she had been reminded that it had yet a palpable existence. It was as thin as a hair, but there were moments when she seemed to hear it vibrate. For herself nothing was changed; what she once thought of him she always thought; it was needless this feeling should change; it seemed to her in fact a better feeling than ever. But he? had he still the idea that she might be more to him than other women? Had he the wish to profit by the memory of the few moments of intimacy through which they had once passed? Isabel knew she had read some of the signs of such a disposition. But what were his hopes, his pretensions, and in what strange way were they mingled with his evidently very sincere appreciation of poor Pansy? Was he in love with Gilbert Osmond's wife, and if so what comfort did he expect to derive from it? If he was in love with Pansy he was not in love with her stepmother, and if he was in love with her stepmother he was not in love with Pansy. Was she to cultivate the advantage she possessed in order to make him commit himself to Pansy, knowing he would do so for her sake and not for the small creature's own—was this the service her husband had asked of her? This at any rate was the duty with which she found herself confronted—from the moment she admitted to herself that her old friend had still an uneradicated predilection for her society. It was not an agreeable task; it was in fact a repulsive one. She asked herself with dismay whether Lord Warburton were pretending to be in love with Pansy in order to cultivate another satisfaction and what might be called other chances. Of this refinement of duplicity she presently acquitted him; she preferred to believe him in perfect good faith. But if his admiration for Pansy were a delusion this was scarcely better than its being an affectation. Isabel wandered among these ugly possibilities until she had completely lost her way; some of them, as she suddenly encountered them, seemed ugly enough. Then she broke out of the labyrinth, rubbing her eyes, and declared that her imagination surely did her little honour and that her husband's did him even less. Lord Warburton was as disinterested as he need be, and she was no more to him than she need wish. She would rest upon this till the contrary should be proved; proved more effectually than by a cynical intimation of Osmond's.

Such a resolution, however, brought her this evening but little peace, for her soul was haunted with terrors which crowded to the foreground of thought as quickly as a place was made for them. What had suddenly set them into livelier motion she hardly knew, unless it were the strange impression she had received in the afternoon of her husband's being in more direct communication with Madame Merle than she suspected. That impression came back to her from time to time, and now she wondered it had never come before. Besides this, her short interview with Osmond half an hour ago was a striking example of his faculty for making everything wither that he touched, spoiling everything for her that he looked at. It was very well to undertake to give him a proof of loyalty; the real fact was that the knowledge of his expecting a thing raised a presumption against it. It was as if he had had the evil eye; as if his presence were a blight and his favour a misfortune. Was the fault in himself, or only in the deep mistrust she had conceived for him? This mistrust was now the clearest result of their short married life; a gulf had opened between them over which they looked at each other with eyes that were on either side a declaration of the deception suffered. It was a strange opposition, of the like of which she had never dreamed—an opposition in which the vital principle of the one was a thing of contempt to the other. It was not her fault—she had practised no deception; she had only admired and believed. She had taken all the first steps in the purest confidence, and then she had suddenly found the infinite vista of a multiplied life to be

a dark, narrow alley with a dead wall at the end. Instead of leading to the high places of happiness, from which the world would seem to lie below one, so that one could look down with a sense of exaltation and advantage, and judge and choose and pity, it led rather downward and earthward, into realms of restriction and depression where the sound of other lives, easier and freer, was heard as from above, and where it served to deepen the feeling of failure. It was her deep distrust of her husband—this was what darkened the world. That is a sentiment easily indicated, but not so easily explained, and so composite in its character that much time and still more suffering had been needed to bring it to its actual perfection. Suffering, with Isabel, was an active condition; it was not a chill, a stupor, a despair; it was a passion of thought, of speculation, of response to every pressure. She flattered herself that she had kept her failing faith to herself, however,—that no one suspected it but Osmond. Oh, he knew it, and there were times when she thought he enjoyed it. It had come gradually—it was not till the first year of their life together, so admirably intimate at first, had closed that she had taken the alarm. Then the shadows had begun to gather; it was as if Osmond deliberately, almost malignantly, had put the lights out one by one. The dusk at first was vague and thin, and she could still see her way in it. But it steadily deepened, and if now and again it had occasionally lifted there were certain corners of her prospect that were impenetrably black. These shadows were not an emanation from her own mind: she was very sure of that; she had done her best to be just and temperate, to see only the truth. They were a part, they were a kind of creation and consequence, of her husband's very presence. They were not his misdeeds, his turpitudes; she accused him of nothing—that is but of one thing, which was *not* a crime. She knew of no wrong he had done; he was not violent, he was not cruel: she simply believed he hated her. That was all she accused him of, and the miserable part of it was precisely that it was not a crime, for against a crime she might have found redress. He had discovered that she was so different, that she was not what he had believed she would prove to be. He had thought at first he could change her, and she had done her best to be what he would like. But she was, after all, herself—she couldn't help that; and now there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress, for he knew her and had made up his mind. She was not afraid of him; she had no apprehension he would hurt her; for the ill-will he bore her was not of that sort. He would if possible never give her a pretext, never put himself in the wrong. Isabel, scanning the future with dry, fixed eyes, saw that he would have the better of her there. She would give him many pretexts, she would often put herself in the wrong. There were times when she almost pitied him; for if she had not deceived him in intention she understood how completely she must have done so in fact. She had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was. It was because she had been under the extraordinary charm that he, on his side, had taken pains to put forth. He was not changed; he had not disguised himself, during the year of his courtship, any more than she. But she had seen only half his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth. She saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man. She had kept still, as it were, so that he should have a free field, and yet in spite of this she had mistaken a part for the whole.

Ah, she had been immensely under the charm! It had not passed away; it was there still: she still knew perfectly what it was that made Osmond delightful when he chose to be. He had wished to be when he made love to her, and as she had wished to be charmed it was not wonderful he had succeeded. He had succeeded because he had been sincere; it never occurred to her now to deny him that. He admired her—he had told her why: because she was the most imaginative woman he had known. It might very well have been true; for during those months she had imagined a world of things that had no substance. She had had a more wondrous vision of him, fed through charmed senses and oh such a stirred fancy!—she had not read him right. A certain combination of features had touched her, and in them she had seen the most striking of figures. That he was poor and lonely and yet that somehow he was noble—that was what had interested her and seemed to give her her opportunity. There had been an indefinable beauty about him—in his situation, in his mind, in his face. She had felt at the same time that he was helpless and ineffectual, but the feeling had taken the form of a tenderness which was the very flower of respect. He was like a sceptical voyager strolling on the beach while he waited for the tide, looking seaward yet not putting to sea. It was in all this she had found her occasion. She would launch his boat for him; she would be his providence; it would be a good thing to love him. And she had loved him, she had so anxiously and yet so ardently given herself—a good deal for what she found in him, but a good deal also for what she brought him and what might enrich the gift. As she looked back at the passion of those full weeks she perceived in it a kind of maternal strain—the happiness of a woman who felt that she was a contributor, that she came with charged hands. But for her money, as she saw to-day, she would never have done it. And then her mind wandered off to poor Mr Touchett, sleeping under English turf, the beneficent author of infinite woe! For this was the fantastic fact. At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other

conscience, to some more prepared receptacle. What would lighten her own conscience more effectually than to make it over to the man with the best taste in the world? Unless she should have given it to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested as in Gilbert Osmond. He would use her fortune in a way that would make her think better of it and rub off a certain grossness attaching to the good luck of an unexpected inheritance. There had been nothing very delicate in inheriting seventy thousand pounds; the delicacy had been all in Mr Touchett's leaving them to her. But to marry Gilbert Osmond and bring him such a portion—in that there would be delicacy for her as well. There would be less for him—that was true; but that was his affair, and if he loved her he wouldn't object to her being rich. Had he not had the courage to say he was glad she was rich?

Isabel's cheek burned when she asked herself if she had really married on a factitious theory, in order to do something finely appreciable with her money. But she was able to answer quickly enough that this was only half the story. It was because a certain ardour took possession of her—a sense of the earnestness of his affection and a delight in his personal qualities. He was better than any one else. This supreme conviction had filled her life for months, and enough of it still remained to prove to her that she could not have done otherwise. The finest—in the sense of being the subtlest—manly organism she had ever known had become her property, and the recognition of her having but to put out her hands and take it had been originally a sort of act of devotion. She had not been mistaken about the beauty of his mind; she knew that organ perfectly now. She had lived with it, she had lived *in* it almost—it appeared to have become her habitation. If she had been captured it had taken a firm hand to seize her; that reflection perhaps had some worth. A mind more ingenious, more pliant, more cultivated, more trained to admirable exercises, she had not encountered; and it was this exquisite instrument she had now to reckon with. She lost herself in infinite dismay when she thought of the magnitude of *his* deception. It was a wonder, perhaps, in view of this, that he didn't hate her more. She remembered perfectly the first sign he had given of it—it had been like the bell that was to ring up the curtain upon the real drama of their life. He said to her one day that she had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them. He had told her that already, before their marriage; but then she had not noticed it: it had come back to her only afterwards. This time she might well have noticed it, because he had really meant it. The words had been nothing superficially; but when in the light of deepening experience she had looked into them they had then appeared portentous. He had really meant it—he would have liked her to have nothing of her own but her pretty appearance. She had known she had too many ideas; she had more even than he had supposed, many more than she had expressed to him when he had asked her to marry him. Yes, she *had* been hypocritical; she had liked him so much. She had too many ideas for herself; but that was just what one married for, to share them with some one else. One couldn't pluck them up by the roots, though of course one might suppress them, be careful not to utter them. It had not been this, however, his objecting to her opinions; this had been nothing. She had no opinions—none that she would not have been eager to sacrifice in the satisfaction of feeling herself loved for it. What he had meant had been the whole thing—her character, the way she felt, the way she judged. This was what she had kept in reserve; this was what he had not known until he had found himself—with the door closed behind, as it were—set down face to face with it. She had a certain way of looking at life which he took as a personal offence. Heaven knew that now at least it was a very humble, accommodating way! The strange thing was that she should not have suspected from the first that his own had been so different. She had thought it so large, so enlightened, so perfectly that of an honest man and a gentleman. Hadn't he assured her that he had no superstitions, no dull limitations, no prejudices that had lost their freshness? Hadn't he all the appearance of a man living in the open air of the world, indifferent to small considerations, caring only for truth and knowledge and believing that two intelligent people ought to look for them together and, whether they found them or not, find at least some happiness in the search? He had told her he loved the conventional; but there was a sense in which this seemed a noble declaration. In that sense, that of the love of harmony and order and decency and of all the stately offices of life, she went with him freely, and his warning had contained nothing ominous. But when, as the months had elapsed, she had followed him further and he had led her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, *then* she had seen where she really was.

She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. Of course it had not been physical suffering; for physical suffering there might have been a remedy. She could come and go; she had her liberty; her husband was perfectly polite. He took himself so seriously; it was something appalling. Under all his culture, his cleverness, his

amenity, under his goodnature, his facility, his knowledge of life, his egotism lay hidden like a serpent in a bank of flowers. She had taken him seriously, but she had not taken him so seriously as that. How could she—especially when she had known him better? She was to think of him as he thought of himself—as the first gentleman in Europe. So it was that she had thought of him at first, and that indeed was the reason she had married him. But when she began to see what it implied she drew back; there was more in the bond than she had meant to put her name to. It implied a sovereign contempt for every one but some three or four very exalted people whom he envied, and for everything in the world but half a dozen ideas of his own. That was very well; she would have gone with him even there a long distance; for he pointed out to her so much of the baseness and shabbiness of life, opened her eyes so wide to the stupidity, the depravity, the ignorance of mankind, that she had been properly impressed with the infinite vulgarity of things and of the virtue of keeping one's self unspotted by it. But this base, ignoble world, it appeared, was after all what one was to live for; one was to keep it for ever in one's eye, in order not to enlighten or convert or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority. On the one hand it was despicable, but on the other it afforded a standard. Osmond had talked to Isabel about his renunciation, his indifference, the ease with which he dispensed with the usual aids to success; and all this had seemed to her admirable. She had thought it a grand indifference, an exquisite independence. But indifference was really the last of his qualities; she had never seen any one who thought so much of others. For herself, avowedly, the world had always interested her and the study of her fellow creatures been her constant passion. She would have been willing, however, to renounce all her curiosities and sympathies for the sake of a personal life, if the person concerned had only been able to make her believe it was a gain! This at least was her present conviction; and the thing certainly would have been easier than to care for society as Osmond cared for it.

He was unable to live without it, and she saw that he had never really done so; he had looked at it out of his window even when he appeared to be most detached from it. He had his ideal, just as she had tried to have hers; only it was strange that people should seek for justice in such different quarters. His ideal was a conception of high prosperity and propriety, of the aristocratic life, which she now saw that he deemed himself always, in essence at least, to have led. He had never lapsed from it for an hour; he would never have recovered from the shame of doing so. That again was very well; here too she would have agreed; but they attached such different ideas, such different associations and desires, to the same formulas. Her notion of the aristocratic life was simply the union of great knowledge with great liberty; the knowledge would give one a sense of duty and the liberty a sense of enjoyment. But for Osmond it was altogether a thing of forms, a conscious, calculated attitude. He was fond of the old, the consecrated, the transmitted; so was she, but she pretended to do what she chose with it. He had an immense esteem for tradition; he had told her once that the best thing in the world was to have it, but that if one was so unfortunate as not to have it one must immediately proceed to make it. She knew that he meant by this that she hadn't it, but that he was better off; though from what source he had derived his traditions she never learned. He had a very large collection of them, however; that was very certain, and after a little she began to see. The great thing was to act in accordance with them; the great thing not only for him but for her. Isabel had an undefined conviction that to serve for another person than their proprietor traditions must be of a thoroughly superior kind; but she nevertheless assented to this intimation that she too must march to the stately music that floated down from unknown periods in her husband's past; she who of old had been so free of step, so desultory, so devious, so much the reverse of processional. There were certain things they must do, a certain posture they must take, certain people they must know and not know. When she saw this rigid system close about her, draped though it was in pictured tapestries, that sense of darkness and suffocation of which I have spoken took possession of her; she seemed shut up with an odour of mould and decay. She had resisted of course; at first very humorously, ironically, tenderly; then, as the situation grew more serious, eagerly, passionately, pleadingly. She had pleaded the cause of freedom, of doing as they chose, of not caring for the aspect and denomination of their life—the cause of other instincts and longings, of quite another ideal.

Then it was that her husband's personality, touched as it never had been, stepped forth and stood erect. The things she had said were answered only by his scorn, and she could see he was ineffably ashamed of her. What did he think of her—that she was base, vulgar, ignoble? He at least knew now that she had no traditions! It had not been in his prevision of things that she should reveal such flatness; her sentiments were worthy of a radical newspaper or a Unitarian preacher.* The real offence, as she ultimately perceived, was her having a mind of her own at all. Her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park. He would rake the soil gently and water the flowers; he would weed the beds and gather an occasional nosegay. It would be a pretty piece of property for a proprietor already far-reaching. He didn't wish her to be stupid. On the contrary, it was because she was

clever that she had pleased him. But he expected her intelligence to operate altogether in his favour, and so far from desiring her mind to be a blank he had flattered himself that it would be richly receptive. He had expected his wife to feel with him and for him, to enter into his opinions, his ambitions, his preferences; and Isabel was obliged to confess that this was no great insolence on the part of a man so accomplished and a husband originally at least so tender. But there were certain things she could never take in. To begin with, they were hideously unclean. She was not a daughter of the Puritans, but for all that she believed in such a thing as chastity and even as decency. It would appear that Osmond was far from doing anything of the sort; some of his traditions made her push back her skirts. Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price? Were there only three or four that didn't deceive their husbands? When Isabel heard such things she felt a greater scorn for them than for the gossip of a village parlour—a scorn that kept its freshness in a very tainted air. There was the taint of her sister-in–law: did her husband judge only by the Countess Gemini? This lady very often lied, and she had practised deceptions that were not simply verbal. It was enough to find these facts assumed among Osmond's traditions—it was enough without giving them such a general extension. It was her scorn of his assumptions, it was this that made him draw himself up. He had plenty of contempt, and it was proper his wife should be as well furnished; but that she should turn the hot light of her disdain upon his own conception of things—this was a danger he had not allowed for. He believed he should have regulated her emotions before she came to it; and Isabel could easily imagine how his ears had scorched on his discovering he had been too confident. When one had a wife who gave one that sensation there was nothing left but to hate her.

She was morally certain now that this feeling of hatred, which at first had been a refuge and a refreshment, had become the occupation and comfort of his life. The feeling was deep, because it was sincere; he had had the revelation that she could after all dispense with him. If to herself the idea was startling, if it presented itself at first as a kind of infidelity, a capacity for pollution, what infinite effect might it not be expected to have had upon *him*? It was very simple; he despised her; she had no traditions and the moral horizon of a Unitarian minister. Poor Isabel, who had never been able to understand Unitarianism! This was the certitude she had been living with now for a time that she had ceased to measure. What was coming—what was before them? That was her constant question. What would he do—what ought *she* to do? When a man hated his wife what did it lead to? She didn't hate him, that she was sure of, for every little while she felt a passionate wish to give him a pleasant surprise. Very often, however, she felt afraid, and it used to come over her, as I have intimated, that she had deceived him at the very first. They were strangely married, at all events, and it was a horrible life. Until that morning he had scarcely spoken to her for a week; his manner was as dry as a burned-out fire. She knew there was a special reason; he was displeased at Ralph Touchett's staying on in Rome. He thought she saw too much of her cousin—he had told her a week before it was indecent she should go to him at his hotel. He would have said more than this if Ralph's invalid state had not appeared to make it brutal to denounce him; but having had to contain himself had only deepened his disgust. Isabel read all this as she would have read the hour on the clock-face; she was as perfectly aware that the sight of her interest in her cousin stirred her husband's rage as if Osmond had locked her into her room—which she was sure was what he wanted to do. It was her honest belief that on the whole she was not defiant, but she certainly couldn't pretend to be indifferent to Ralph. She believed he was dying at last and that she should never see him again, and this gave her a tenderness for him that she had never known before. Nothing was a pleasure to her now; how could anything be a pleasure to a woman who knew that she had thrown away her life? There was an everlasting weight on her heart—there was a livid light on everything. But Ralph's little visit was a lamp in the darkness; for the hour that she sat with him her ache for herself became somehow her ache for *him*. She felt to-day as if he had been her brother. She had never had a brother, but if she had and she were in trouble and he were dying, he would be dear to her as Ralph was. Ah yes, if Gilbert was jealous of her there was perhaps some reason; it didn't make Gilbert look better to sit for half an hour with Ralph. It was not that they talked of him—it was not that she complained. His name was never uttered between them. It was simply that Ralph was generous and that her husband was not. There was something in Ralph's talk, in his smile, in the mere fact of his being in Rome, that made the blasted circle round which she walked more spacious. He made her feel the good of the world; he made her feel what might have been. He was after all as intelligent as Osmond—quite apart from his being better. And thus it seemed to her an act of devotion to conceal her misery from him. She concealed it elaborately; she was perpetually, in their talk, hanging out curtains and arranging screens. It lived before her again—it had never had time to die—that morning in the garden at Florence when he had warned her against Osmond. She had only to close her eyes to see the place, to hear his voice, to feel the warm, sweet air. How could he have known? What a mystery, what a wonder of wisdom! As intelligent as Gilbert? He was much more

intelligent—to arrive at such a judgement as that. Gilbert had never been so deep, so just. She had told him then that from her at least he should never know if he was right; and this was what she was taking care of now. It gave her plenty to do; there was passion, exaltation, religion in it. Women find their religion sometimes in strange exercises, and Isabel at present, in playing a part before her cousin, had an idea that she was doing him a kindness. It would have been a kindness perhaps if he had been for a single instant a dupe. As it was, the kindness consisted mainly in trying to make him believe that he had once wounded her greatly and that the event had put him to shame, but that, as she was very generous and he was so ill, she bore him no grudge and even considerately forbore to flaunt her happiness in his face. Ralph smiled to himself, as he lay on his sofa, at this extraordinary form of consideration; but he forgave her for having forgiven him. She didn't wish him to have the pain of knowing she was unhappy: that was the great thing, and it didn't matter that such knowledge would rather have righted him.

For herself, she lingered in the soundless saloon long after the fire had gone out. There was no danger of her feeling the cold; she was in a fever. She heard the small hours strike, and then the great ones, but her vigil took no heed of time. Her mind, assailed by visions, was in a state of extraordinary activity, and her visions might as well come to her there, where she sat up to meet them, as on her pillow, to make a mockery of rest. As I have said, she believed she was not defiant, and what could be a better proof of it than that she should linger there half the night, trying to persuade herself that there was no reason why Pansy shouldn't be married as you would put a letter in the post-office? When the clock struck four she got up; she was going to bed at last, for the lamp had long since gone out and the candles burned down to their sockets. But even then she stopped again in the middle of the room and stood there gazing at a remembered vision—that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated.

XLIII

THREE nights after this she took Pansy to a great party, to which Osmond, who never went to dances, did not accompany them. Pansy was as ready for a dance as ever; she was not of a generalising turn and had not extended to other pleasures the interdict she had seen placed on those of love. If she was biding her time or hoping to circumvent her father she must have had a prevision of success. Isabel thought this unlikely; it was much more likely that Pansy had simply determined to be a good girl. She had never had such a chance, and she had a proper esteem for chances. She carried herself no less attentively than usual and kept no less anxious an eye upon her vaporous skirts; she held her bouquet very tight and counted over the flowers for the twentieth time. She made Isabel feel old; it seemed so long since she had been in a flutter about a ball. Pansy, who was greatly admired, was never in want of partners, and very soon after their arrival she gave Isabel, who was not dancing, her bouquet to hold. Isabel had rendered her this service for some minutes when she became aware of the near presence of Edward Rosier. He stood before her; he had lost his affable smile and wore a look of almost military resolution. The change in his appearance would have made Isabel smile if she had not felt his case to be at bottom a hard one: he had always smelt so much more of heliotrope than of gunpowder. He looked at her a moment somewhat fiercely, as if to notify her he was dangerous, and then dropped his eyes on her bouquet. After he had inspected it his glance softened and he said quickly: 'It's all pansies; it must be hers!'

Isabel smiled kindly. 'Yes, it's hers; she gave it to me to hold.'

'May I hold it a little, Mrs Osmond?' the poor young man asked.

'No, I can't trust you; I'm afraid you wouldn't give it back.'

'I'm not sure that I should; I should leave the house with it instantly. But may I not at least have a single flower?'

Isabel hesitated a moment, and then, smiling still, held out the bouquet. 'Choose one yourself. It's frightful what I'm doing for you.'

'Ah, if you do no more than this, Mrs Osmond!' Rosier exclaimed with his glass in one eye, carefully choosing his flower.

'Don't put it into your button-hole,' she said. 'Don't for the world!'

'I should like her to see it. She has refused to dance with me, but I wish to show her that I believe in her still.'

'It's very well to show it to her, but it's out of place to show it to others. Her father has told her not to dance with you.'

'And is that all *you* can do for me? I expected more from you, Mrs Osmond,' said the young man in a tone of fine general reference. 'You know our acquaintance goes back very far—quite into the days of our innocent childhood.'

'Don't make me out too old,' Isabel patiently answered. 'You come back to that very often, and I've never denied it. But I must tell you that, old friends as we are, if you had done me the honour to ask me to marry you I should have refused you on the spot.'

'Ah, you don't esteem me then. Say at once that you think me a mere Parisian trifler!'

'I esteem you very much, but I'm not in love with you. What I mean by that, of course, is that I'm not in love with you for Pansy.'

'Very good; I see. You pity me—that's all.' And Edward Rosier looked all round, inconsequently, with his single glass. It was a revelation to him that people shouldn't be more pleased; but he was at least too proud to show that the deficiency struck him as general.

Isabel for a moment said nothing. His manner and appearance had not the dignity of the deepest tragedy; his little glass, among other things, was against that. But she suddenly felt touched; her own unhappiness, after all, had something in common with his, and it came over her, more than before, that here, in recognisable, if not in romantic form, was the most affecting thing in the world—young love struggling with adversity. 'Would you really be very kind to her?' she finally asked in a low tone.

He dropped his eyes devoutly and raised the little flower that he held in his fingers to his lips. Then he looked at her. 'You pity me; but don't you pity *her* a little?'

'I don't know; I'm not sure. She'll always enjoy life.'

‘It will depend on what you call life!’ Mr Rosier effectively said. ‘She won’t enjoy being tortured.’

‘There’ll be nothing of that.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. She knows what she’s about. You’ll see.’

‘I think she does, and she’ll never disobey her father. But she’s coming back to me,’ Isabel added, ‘and I must beg you to go away.’

Rosier lingered a moment till Pansy came in sight on the arm of her cavalier; he stood just long enough to look her in the face. Then he walked away, holding up his head; and the manner in which he achieved this sacrifice to expediency convinced Isabel he was very much in love.

Pansy, who seldom got disarranged in dancing, looking perfectly fresh and cool after this exercise, waited a moment and then took back her bouquet. Isabel watched her and saw she was counting the flowers; whereupon she said to herself that decidedly there were deeper forces at play than she had recognised. Pansy had seen Rosier turn away, but she said nothing to Isabel about him; she talked only of her partner, after he had made his bow and retired; of the music, the floor, the rare misfortune of having already torn her dress. Isabel was sure, however, she had discovered her lover to have abstracted a flower; though this knowledge was not needed to account for the dutiful grace with which she responded to the appeal of her next partner. That perfect amenity under acute constraint was part of a larger system. She was again led forth by a flushed young man, this time carrying her bouquet; and she had not been absent many minutes when Isabel saw Lord Warburton advancing through the crowd. He presently drew near and bade her good-evening; she had not seen him since the day before. He looked about him, and then ‘Where’s the little maid?’ he asked. It was in this manner that he had formed the harmless habit of alluding to Miss Osmond.

‘She’s dancing,’ said Isabel. ‘You’ll see her somewhere.’

He looked among the dancers and at last caught Pansy’s eye. ‘She sees me, but she won’t notice me,’ he then remarked. ‘Are you not dancing?’

‘As you see, I’m a wall-flower.’

‘Won’t you dance with me?’

‘Thank you; I’d rather you should dance with the little maid.’

‘One needn’t prevent the other—especially as she’s engaged.’

‘She’s not engaged for everything, and you can reserve yourself. She dances very hard, and you’ll be the fresher.’

‘She dances beautifully,’ said Lord Warburton, following her with his eyes. ‘Ah, at last,’ he added, ‘she has given me a smile.’ He stood there with his handsome, easy, important physiognomy; and as Isabel observed him it came over her, as it had done before, that it was strange a man of his mettle should take an interest in a little maid. It struck her as a great incongruity; neither Pansy’s small fascinations, nor his own kindness, his good-nature, not even his need for amusement, which was extreme and constant, were sufficient to account for it. ‘I should like to dance with you,’ he went on in a moment, turning back to Isabel; ‘but I think I like even better to talk with you.’

‘Yes, it’s better, and it’s more worthy of your dignity. Great statesmen oughtn’t to waltz.’

‘Don’t be cruel. Why did you recommend me then to dance with Miss Osmond?’

‘Ah, that’s different. If you danced with her it would look simply like a piece of kindness—as if you were doing it for her amusement. If you dance with me you’ll look as if you were doing it for your own.’

‘And pray haven’t I a right to amuse myself?’

‘No, not with the affairs of the British Empire on your hands.’

‘The British Empire be hanged! You’re always laughing at it.’

‘Amuse yourself with talking to me,’ said Isabel.

‘I’m not sure it’s really a recreation. You’re too pointed; I’ve always to be defending myself. And you strike me as more than usually dangerous to-night. Will you absolutely not dance?’

‘I can’t leave my place. Pansy must find me here.’

He was silent a little. ‘You’re wonderfully good to her,’ he said suddenly.

Isabel stared a little and smiled. ‘Can you imagine one’s not being?’

‘No indeed. I know how one is charmed with her. But you must have done a great deal for her.’

‘I’ve taken her out with me,’ said Isabel, smiling still. ‘And I’ve seen that she has proper clothes.’

‘Your society must have been a great benefit to her. You’ve talked to her, advised her, helped her to develop.’

‘Ah yes, if she isn’t the rose she has lived near it.’

She laughed, and her companion did as much; but there was a certain visible preoccupation in his face which interfered with complete hilarity. ‘We all try to live as near it as we can,’ he said after a moment’s hesitation.

Isabel turned away; Pansy was about to be restored to her, and she welcomed the diversion. We know how much she liked Lord Warburton; she thought him pleasanter even than the sum of his merits warranted; there was something in his friendship that appeared a kind of resource in case of indefinite need; it was like having a large balance at the bank. She felt happier when he was in the room; there was something reassuring in his approach; the sound of his voice reminded her of the beneficence of nature. Yet for all that it didn’t suit her that he should be too near her, that he should take too much of her good-will for granted. She was afraid of that; she averted herself from it; she wished he wouldn’t. She felt that if he should come too near, as it were, it might be in her to flash out and bid him keep his distance. Pansy came back to Isabel with another rent in her skirt, which was the inevitable consequence of the first and which she displayed to Isabel with serious eyes. There were too many gentlemen in uniform; they wore those dreadful spurs, which were fatal to the dresses of little maids. It hereupon became apparent that the resources of women are innumerable. Isabel devoted herself to Pansy’s desecrated drapery; she fumbled for a pin and repaired the injury; she smiled and listened to her account of her adventures. Her attention, her sympathy were immediate and active; and they were in direct proportion to a sentiment with which they were in no way connected—a lively conjecture as to whether Lord Warburton might be trying to make love to her. It was not simply his words just then; it was others as well; it was the reference and the continuity. This was what she thought about while she pinned up Pansy’s dress. If it were so, as she feared, he was of course unwitting; he himself had not taken account of his intention. But this made it none the more auspicious, made the situation none the less impossible. The sooner he should get back into right relations with things the better. He immediately began to talk to Pansy—on whom it was certainly mystifying to see that he dropped a smile of chastened devotion. Pansy replied, as usual, with a little air of conscientious aspiration; he had to bend toward her a good deal in conversation, and her eyes, as usual, wandered up and down his robust person as if he had offered it to her for exhibition. She always seemed a little frightened; yet her fright was not of the painful character that suggests dislike; on the contrary, she looked as if she knew that he knew she liked him. Isabel left them together a little and wandered toward a friend whom she saw near and with whom she talked till the music of the following dance began, for which she knew Pansy to be also engaged. The girl joined her presently, with a little fluttered flush, and Isabel, who scrupulously took Osmond’s view of his daughter’s complete dependence, consigned her, as a precious and momentary loan, to her appointed partner. About all this matter she had her own imaginations, her own reserves; there were moments when Pansy’s extreme adhesiveness made each of them, to her sense, look foolish. But Osmond had given her a sort of tableau of her position as his daughter’s duenna,* which consisted of gracious alternations of concession and contraction; and there were directions of his which she liked to think she obeyed to the letter. Perhaps, as regards some of them, it was because her doing so appeared to reduce them to the absurd.

After Pansy had been led away, she found Lord Warburton drawing near her again. She rested her eyes on him steadily; she wished she could sound his thoughts. But he had no appearance of confusion. ‘She has promised to dance with me later,’ he said.

‘I’m glad of that. I suppose you’ve engaged her for the cotillion.’

At this he looked a little awkward. ‘No, I didn’t ask her for that. It’s a quadrille.’*

‘Ah, you’re not clever!’ said Isabel almost angrily. ‘I told her to keep the cotillion in case you should ask for it.’

‘Poor little maid, fancy that!’ And Lord Warburton laughed frankly. ‘Of course I will if you like.’

‘If I like? Oh, if you dance with her only because I like it—!’

‘I’m afraid I bore her. She seems to have a lot of young fellows on her book.’

Isabel dropped her eyes, reflecting rapidly; Lord Warburton stood there looking at her and she felt his eyes on her face. She felt much inclined to ask him to remove them. She didn’t do so, however; she only said to him, after a minute, with her own raised: ‘Please let me understand.’

‘Understand what?’

‘You told me ten days ago that you’d like to marry my stepdaughter. You’ve not forgotten it!’

‘Forgotten it? I wrote to Mr Osmond about it this morning.’

‘Ah,’ said Isabel, ‘he didn’t mention to me that he had heard from you.’

Lord Warburton stammered a little. ‘I—I didn’t send my letter.’

‘Perhaps you forgot *that*.’

‘No, I wasn’t satisfied with it. It’s an awkward sort of letter to write, you know. But I shall send it to-night.’

‘At three o’clock in the morning?’

‘I mean later, in the course of the day.’

‘Very good. You still wish then to marry her?’

‘Very much indeed.’

‘Aren’t you afraid that you’ll bore her?’ And as her companion stared at this enquiry Isabel added: ‘If she can’t dance with you for half an hour how will she be able to dance with you for life?’

‘Ah,’ said Lord Warburton readily, ‘I’ll let her dance with other people! About the cotillion, the fact is I thought that you—that you—’

‘That I would do it with you? I told you I’d do nothing.’

‘Exactly; so that while it’s going on I might find some quiet corner where we may sit down and talk.’

‘Oh,’ said Isabel gravely, ‘you’re much too considerate of me.’

When the cotillion came Pansy was found to have engaged herself, thinking, in perfect humility, that Lord Warburton had no intentions. Isabel recommended him to seek another partner, but he assured her that he would dance with no one but herself. As, however, she had, in spite of the remonstrances of her hostess, declined other invitations on the ground that she was not dancing at all, it was not possible for her to make an exception in Lord Warburton’s favour.

‘After all I don’t care to dance,’ he said; ‘it’s a barbarous amusement: I’d much rather talk.’ And he intimated that he had discovered exactly the corner he had been looking for—a quiet nook in one of the smaller rooms, where the music would come to them faintly and not interfere with conversation. Isabel had decided to let him carry out his idea; she wished to be satisfied. She wandered away from the ball-room with him, though she knew her husband desired she should not lose sight of his daughter. It was with his daughter’s *prétendant*,* however; that would make it right for Osmond. On her way out of the ball-room she came upon Edward Rosier, who was standing in a doorway, with folded arms, looking at the dance in the attitude of a young man without illusions. She stopped a moment and asked him if he were not dancing.

‘Certainly not, if I can’t dance with *her*!’ he answered.

‘You had better go away then,’ said Isabel with the manner of good counsel.

‘I shall not go till she does!’ And he let Lord Warburton pass without giving him a look.

This nobleman, however, had noticed the melancholy youth, and he asked Isabel who her dismal friend was, remarking that he had seen him somewhere before.

‘It’s the young man I’ve told you about, who’s in love with Pansy.’

‘Ah yes, I remember. He looks rather bad.’

‘He has reason. My husband won’t listen to him.’

‘What’s the matter with him?’ Lord Warburton enquired. ‘He seems very harmless.’

‘He hasn’t money enough, and he isn’t very clever.’

Lord Warburton listened with interest; he seemed struck with this account of Edward Rosier. ‘Dear me; he looked a well-set–up young fellow.’

‘So he is, but my husband’s very particular.’

‘Oh, I see.’ And Lord Warburton paused a moment. ‘How much money has he got?’ he then ventured to ask.

‘Some forty thousand francs a year.’

‘Sixteen hundred pounds? Ah, but that’s very good, you know.’

‘So I think. My husband, however, has larger ideas.’

‘Yes; I’ve noticed that your husband has very large ideas. Is he really an idiot, the young man?’

‘An idiot? Not in the least; he’s charming. When he was twelve years old I myself was in love with him.’

‘He doesn’t look much more than twelve to-day,’ Lord Warburton rejoined vaguely, looking about him. Then with more point, ‘Don’t you think we might sit here?’ he asked.

‘Wherever you please.’ The room was a sort of boudoir, pervaded by a subdued, rose-coloured light; a lady and gentleman moved out of it as our friends came in. ‘It’s very kind of you to take such an interest

in Mr Rosier,' Isabel said.

'He seems to me rather ill-treated. He had a face a yard long. I wondered what ailed him.'

'You're a just man,' said Isabel. 'You've a kind thought even for a rival.'

Lord Warburton suddenly turned with a stare. 'A rival! Do you call him my rival?'

'Surely—if you both wish to marry the same person.'

'Yes—but since he has no chance!'

'I like you, however that may be, for putting yourself in his place. It shows imagination.'

'You like me for it?' And Lord Warburton looked at her with an uncertain eye. 'I think you mean you're laughing at me for it.'

'Yes, I'm laughing at you a little. But I like you as somebody to laugh at.'

'Ah well, then, let me enter into his situation a little more. What do you suppose one could do for him?'

'Since I have been praising your imagination I'll leave you to imagine that yourself,' Isabel said. 'Pansy too would like you for that.'

'Miss Osmond? Ah, she, I flatter myself, likes me already.'

'Very much, I think.'

He waited a little; he was still questioning her face. 'Well then, I don't understand you. You don't mean that she cares for him?'

'Surely I've told you I thought she did.'

A quick blush sprang to his brow. 'You told me she would have no wish apart from her father's, and as I've gathered that he would favour me—!' He paused a little and then suggested 'Don't you see?' through his blush.

'Yes, I told you she has an immense wish to please her father, and that it would probably take her very far.'

'That seems to me a very proper feeling,' said Lord Warburton.

'Certainly; it's a very proper feeling.' Isabel remained silent for some moments; the room continued empty; the sound of the music reached them with its richness softened by the interposing apartments. Then at last she said: 'But it hardly strikes me as the sort of feeling to which a man would wish to be indebted for a wife.'

'I don't know; if the wife's a good one and he thinks she does well!'

'Yes, of course you must think that.'

'I do; I can't help it. You call that very British, of course.'

'No, I don't. I think Pansy would do wonderfully well to marry you, and I don't know who should know it better than you. But you're not in love.'

'Ah, yes I am, Mrs Osmond!'

Isabel shook her head. 'You like to think you are while you sit here with me. But that's not how you strike me.'

'I'm not like the young man in the doorway. I admit that. But what makes it so unnatural? Could any one in the world be more loveable than Miss Osmond?'

'No one, possibly. But love has nothing to do with good reasons.'

'I don't agree with you. I'm delighted to have good reasons.'

'Of course you are. If you were really in love you wouldn't care a straw for them.'

'Ah, really in love—really in love!' Lord Warburton exclaimed, folding his arms, leaning back his head and stretching himself a little. 'You must remember that I'm forty-two years old. I won't pretend I'm as I once was.'

'Well, if you're sure,' said Isabel, 'it's all right.'

He answered nothing; he sat there, with his head back, looking before him. Abruptly, however, he changed his position; he turned quickly to his friend. 'Why are you so unwilling, so sceptical?'

She met his eyes, and for a moment they looked straight at each other. If she wished to be satisfied she saw something that satisfied her; she saw in his expression the gleam of an idea that she was uneasy on her own account—that she was perhaps even in fear. It showed a suspicion, not a hope, but such as it was it told her what she wanted to know. Not for an instant should he suspect her of detecting in his proposal of marrying her stepdaughter an implication of increased nearness to herself, or of thinking it,

on such a betrayal, ominous. In that brief, extremely personal gaze, however, deeper meanings passed between them than they were conscious of at the moment.

'My dear Lord Warburton,' she said, smiling, 'you may do, as far as I'm concerned, whatever comes into your head.'

And with this she got up and wandered into the adjoining room, where, within her companion's view, she was immediately addressed by a pair of gentlemen, high personages in the Roman world, who met her as if they had been looking for her. While she talked with them she found herself regretting she had moved; it looked a little like running away—all the more as Lord Warburton didn't follow her. She was glad of this, however, and at any rate she was satisfied. She was so well satisfied that when, in passing back into the ballroom, she found Edward Rosier still planted in the doorway, she stopped and spoke to him again. 'You did right not to go away. I've some comfort for you.'

'I need it,' the young man softly wailed, 'when I see you so awfully thick with *him*!'

'Don't speak of him; I'll do what I can for you. I'm afraid it won't be much, but what I can I'll do.'

He looked at her with gloomy obliqueness. 'What has suddenly brought you round?'

'The sense that you are an inconvenience in doorways!' she answered, smiling as she passed him. Half an hour later she took leave, with Pansy, and at the foot of the staircase the two ladies, with many other departing guests, waited a while for their carriage. Just as it approached Lord Warburton came out of the house and assisted them to reach their vehicle. He stood a moment at the door, asking Pansy if she had amused herself; and she, having answered him, fell back with a little air of fatigue. Then Isabel, at the window, detaining him by a movement of her finger, murmured gently: 'Don't forget to send your letter to her father!'

XLIV

THE Countess Gemini was often extremely bored—bored, in her own phrase, to extinction. She had not been extinguished, however, and she struggled bravely enough with her destiny, which had been to marry an unaccommodating Florentine who insisted upon living in his native town, where he enjoyed such consideration as might attach to a gentleman whose talent for losing at cards had not the merit of being incidental to an obliging disposition. The Count Gemini was not liked even by those who won from him; and he bore a name which, having a measurable value in Florence, was, like the local coin of the old Italian states, without currency in other parts of the peninsula. In Rome he was simply a very dull Florentine, and it is not remarkable that he should not have cared to pay frequent visits to a place where, to carry it off, his dulness needed more explanation than was convenient. The Countess lived with her eyes upon Rome, and it was the constant grievance of her life that she had not an habitation there. She was ashamed to say how seldom she had been allowed to visit that city; it scarcely made the matter better that there were other members of the Florentine nobility who never had been there at all. She went whenever she could; that was all she could say. Or rather not all, but all she said she could say. In fact she had much more to say about it, and had often set forth the reasons why she hated Florence and wished to end her days in the shadow of Saint Peter's. They are reasons, however, that do not closely concern us, and were usually summed up in the declaration that Rome, in short, was the Eternal City and that Florence was simply a pretty little place like any other.* The Countess apparently needed to connect the idea of eternity with her amusements. She was convinced that society was infinitely more interesting in Rome, where you met celebrities all winter at evening parties. At Florence there were no celebrities; none at least that one had heard of. Since her brother's marriage her impatience had greatly increased; she was so sure his wife had a more brilliant life than herself. She was not so intellectual as Isabel, but she was intellectual enough to do justice to Rome—not to the ruins and the catacombs, not even perhaps to the monuments and museums, the church ceremonies and the scenery; but certainly to all the rest. She heard a great deal about her sister-in–law and knew perfectly that Isabel was having a beautiful time. She had indeed seen it for herself on the only occasion on which she had enjoyed the hospitality of Palazzo Roccanera. She had spent a week there during the first winter of her brother's marriage, but she had not been encouraged to renew this satisfaction. Osmond didn't want her—that she was perfectly aware of; but she would have gone all the same, for after all she didn't care two straws about Osmond. It was her husband who wouldn't let her, and the money question was always a trouble. Isabel had been very nice; the Countess, who had liked her sister-in–law from the first, had not been blinded by envy to Isabel's personal merits. She had always observed that she got on better with clever women than with silly ones like herself; the silly ones could never understand her wisdom, whereas the clever ones—the really clever ones—always understood her silliness. It appeared to her that, different as they were in appearance and general style, Isabel and she had somewhere a patch of common ground that they would set their feet upon at last. It was not very large, but it was firm, and they should both know it when once they had really touched it. And then she lived, with Mrs Osmond, under the influence of a pleasant surprise; she was constantly expecting that Isabel would 'look down' on her, and she as constantly saw this operation postponed. She asked herself when it would begin, like fire-works, or Lent, or the opera season; not that she cared much, but she wondered what kept it in abeyance. Her sister-in–law regarded her with none but level glances and expressed for the poor Countess as little contempt as admiration. In reality Isabel would as soon have thought of despising her as of passing a moral judgement on a grasshopper. She was not indifferent to her husband's sister, however; she was rather a little afraid of her. She wondered at her; she thought her very extraordinary. The Countess seemed to her to have no soul; she was like a bright rare shell, with a polished surface and a remarkably pink lip, in which something would rattle when you shook it. This rattle was apparently the Countess's spiritual principle, a little loose nut that tumbled about inside of her. She was too odd for disdain, too anomalous for comparisons. Isabel would have invited her again (there was no question of inviting the Count); but Osmond, after his marriage, had not scrupled to say frankly that Amy was a fool of the worst species—a fool whose folly had the irrepressibility of genius. He said at another time that she had no heart; and he added in a moment that she had given it all away—in small pieces, like a frosted wedding-cake. The fact of not having been asked was of course another obstacle to the Countess's going again to Rome; but at the period with which this history has now to deal she was in receipt of an invitation to spend several weeks at Palazzo Roccanera. The proposal had come from Osmond himself, who wrote to his sister that she must be prepared to be very quiet. Whether or no

she found in this phrase all the meaning he had put into it I am unable to say; but she accepted the invitation on any terms. She was curious, moreover; for one of the impressions of her former visit had been that her brother had found his match. Before the marriage she had been sorry for Isabel, so sorry as to have had serious thoughts—if any of the Countess's thoughts were serious—of putting her on her guard. But she had let that pass, and after a little she was reassured. Osmond was as lofty as ever, but his wife would not be an easy victim. The Countess was not very exact at measurements, but it seemed to her that if Isabel should draw herself up she would be the taller spirit of the two. What she wanted to learn now was whether Isabel had drawn herself up; it would give her immense pleasure to see Osmond overtopped.

Several days before she was to start for Rome a servant brought her the card of a visitor—a card with the simple superscription 'Henrietta C. Stackpole.' The Countess pressed her finger-tips to her forehead; she didn't remember to have known any such Henrietta as that. The servant then remarked that the lady had requested him to say that if the Countess should not recognise her name she would know her well enough on seeing her. By the time she appeared before her visitor she had in fact reminded herself that there was once a literary lady at Mrs Touchett's; the only woman of letters she had ever encountered—that is the only modern one, since she was the daughter of a defunct poetess. She recognised Miss Stackpole immediately, the more so that Miss Stackpole seemed perfectly unchanged; and the Countess, who was thoroughly good-natured, thought it rather fine to be called on by a person of that sort of distinction. She wondered if Miss Stackpole had come on account of her mother—whether she had heard of the American Corinne.* Her mother was not at all like Isabel's friend; the Countess could see at a glance that this lady was much more contemporary; and she received an impression of the improvements that were taking place—chiefly in distant countries—in the character (the professional character) of literary ladies. Her mother had been used to wear a Roman scarf thrown over a pair of shoulders timorously bared of their tight black velvet (oh the old clothes!) and a gold laurel-wreath set upon a multitude of glossy ringlets. She had spoken softly and vaguely, with the accent of her 'Creole' ancestors,* as she always confessed; she sighed a great deal and was not at all enterprising. But Henrietta, the Countess could see, was always closely buttoned and compactly braided; there was something brisk and business-like in her appearance; her manner was almost conscientiously familiar. It was as impossible to imagine her ever vaguely sighing as to imagine a letter posted without its address. The Countess could not but feel that the correspondent of the *Interviewer* was much more in the movement than the American Corinne. She explained that she had called on the Countess because she was the only person she knew in Florence, and that when she visited a foreign city she liked to see something more than superficial travellers. She knew Mrs Touchett, but Mrs Touchett was in America, and even if she had been in Florence Henrietta would not have put herself out for her, since Mrs Touchett was not one of her admirations.

'Do you mean by that that I am?' the Countess graciously asked.

'Well, I like you better than I do her,' said Miss Stackpole. 'I seem to remember that when I saw you before you were very interesting. I don't know whether it was an accident or whether it's your usual style. At any rate I was a good deal struck with what you said. I made use of it afterwards in print.'

'Dear me!' cried the Countess, staring and half alarmed; 'I had no idea I ever said anything remarkable! I wish I had known it at the time.'

'It was about the position of woman in this city,' Miss Stackpole remarked. 'You threw a good deal of light upon it.'

'The position of woman's very uncomfortable. Is that what you mean? And you wrote it down and published it?' the Countess went on. 'Ah, do let me see it!'

'I'll write to them to send you the paper if you like,' Henrietta said. 'I didn't mention your name; I only said a lady of high rank. And then I quoted your views.'

The Countess threw herself hastily backward, tossing up her clasped hands. 'Do you know I'm rather sorry you didn't mention my name? I should have rather liked to see my name in the papers. I forget what my views were; I have so many! But I'm not ashamed of them. I'm not at all like my brother—I suppose you know my brother? He thinks it a kind of scandal to be put in the papers; if you were to quote him he'd never forgive you.'

'He needn't be afraid; I shall never refer to him,' said Miss Stackpole with bland dryness. 'That's another reason,' she added, 'why I wanted to come to see you. You know Mr Osmond married my dearest friend.'

'Ah, yes; you were a friend of Isabel's. I was trying to think what I knew about you.'

‘I’m quite willing to be known by that,’ Henrietta declared. ‘But that isn’t what your brother likes to know me by. He has tried to break up my relations with Isabel.’

‘Don’t permit it,’ said the Countess.

‘That’s what I want to talk about. I’m going to Rome.’

‘So am I!’ the Countess cried. ‘We’ll go together.’

‘With great pleasure. And when I write about my journey I’ll mention you by name as my companion.’

The Countess sprang from her chair and came and sat on the sofa beside her visitor. ‘Ah, you must send me the paper! My husband won’t like it, but he need never see it. Besides, he doesn’t know how to read.’

Henrietta’s large eyes became immense. ‘Doesn’t know how to read? May I put that into my letter?’

‘Into your letter?’

‘In the *Interviewer*. That’s my paper.’

‘Oh yes, if you like; with his name. Are you going to stay with Isabel?’

Henrietta held up her head, gazing a little in silence at her hostess. ‘She has not asked me. I wrote to her I was coming, and she answered that she would engage a room for me at a *pension*. She gave no reason.’

The Countess listened with extreme interest. ‘The reason’s Osmond,’ she pregnantly remarked.

‘Isabel ought to make a stand,’ said Miss Stackpole. ‘I’m afraid she has changed a great deal. I told her she would.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it; I hoped she would have her own way.

Why doesn’t my brother like you?’ the Countess ingenuously added.

‘I don’t know and I don’t care. He’s perfectly welcome not to like me; I don’t want every one to like me; I should think less of myself if some people did. A journalist can’t hope to do much good unless he gets a good deal hated; that’s the way he knows how his work goes on. And it’s just the same for a lady. But I didn’t expect it of Isabel.’

‘Do you mean that she hates you?’ the Countess enquired.

‘I don’t know; I want to see. That’s what I’m going to Rome for.’

‘Dear me, what a tiresome errand!’ the Countess exclaimed.

‘She doesn’t write to me in the same way; it’s easy to see there’s a difference. If you know anything,’ Miss Stackpole went on, ‘I should like to hear it beforehand, so as to decide on the line I shall take.’

The Countess thrust out her under lip and gave a gradual shrug. ‘I know very little; I see and hear very little of Osmond. He doesn’t like me any better than he appears to like you.’

‘Yet you’re not a lady correspondent,’ said Henrietta pensively.

‘Oh, he has plenty of reasons. Nevertheless they’ve invited me—I’m to stay in the house!’ And the Countess smiled almost fiercely; her exultation, for the moment, took little account of Miss Stackpole’s disappointment.

This lady, however, regarded it very placidly. ‘I shouldn’t have gone if she *had* asked me. That is I think I shouldn’t; and I’m glad I hadn’t to make up my mind. It would have been a very difficult question. I shouldn’t have liked to turn away from her, and yet I shouldn’t have been happy under her roof. A *pension* will suit me very well. But that’s not all.’

‘Rome’s very good just now,’ said the Countess; ‘there are all sorts of brilliant people. Did you ever hear of Lord Warburton?’

‘Hear of him? I know him very well. Do you consider him very brilliant?’ Henrietta enquired.

‘I don’t know him, but I’m told he’s extremely *grand seigneur*.* He’s making love to Isabel.’

‘Making love to her?’

‘So I’m told; I don’t know the details,’ said the Countess lightly. ‘But Isabel’s pretty safe.’

Henrietta gazed earnestly at her companion; for a moment she said nothing. ‘When do you go to Rome?’ she enquired abruptly.

‘Not for a week, I’m afraid.’

‘I shall go to-morrow,’ Henrietta said. ‘I think I had better not wait.’

‘Dear me, I’m sorry; I’m having some dresses made. I’m told Isabel receives immensely. But I shall see you there; I shall call on you at your *pension*.’ Henrietta sat still—she was lost in thought; and suddenly the Countess cried: ‘Ah, but if you don’t go with me you can’t describe our journey!’

Miss Stackpole seemed unmoved by this consideration; she was thinking of something else and presently expressed it. ‘I’m not sure that I understand you about Lord Warburton.’

‘Understand me? I mean he’s very nice, that’s all.’

‘Do you consider it nice to make love to married women?’ Henrietta enquired with unprecedented distinctness.

The Countess stared, and then with a little violent laugh: ‘It’s certain all the nice men do it. Get married and you’ll see!’ she added.

‘That idea would be enough to prevent me,’ said Miss Stackpole. ‘I should want my own husband; I shouldn’t want any one else’s. Do you mean that Isabel’s guilty—guilty—?’ And she paused a little, choosing her expression.

‘Do I mean she’s guilty? Oh dear no, not yet, I hope. I only mean that Osmond’s very tiresome and that Lord Warburton, as I hear, is a great deal at the house. I’m afraid you’re scandalised.’

‘No, I’m just anxious,’ Henrietta said.

‘Ah, you’re not very complimentary to Isabel! You should have more confidence. I’ll tell you,’ the Countess added quickly: ‘if it will be a comfort to you I engage to draw him off.’

Miss Stackpole answered at first only with the deeper solemnity of her gaze. ‘You don’t understand me,’ she said after a while. ‘I haven’t the idea you seem to suppose. I’m not afraid for Isabel—in that way. I’m only afraid she’s unhappy—that’s what I want to get at.’

The Countess gave a dozen turns of the head; she looked impatient and sarcastic. ‘That may very well be; for my part I should like to know whether Osmond is.’ Miss Stackpole had begun a little to bore her.

‘If she’s really changed that must be at the bottom of it,’ Henrietta went on.

‘You’ll see; she’ll tell you,’ said the Countess.

‘Ah, she may *not* tell me—that’s what I’m afraid of!’

‘Well, if Osmond isn’t amusing himself—in his own old way—I flatter myself I shall discover it,’ the Countess rejoined.

‘I don’t care for that,’ said Henrietta.

‘I do immensely! If Isabel’s unhappy I’m very sorry for her, but I can’t help it. I might tell her something that would make her worse, but I can’t tell her anything that would console her. What did she go and marry him for? If she had listened to me she’d have got rid of him. I’ll forgive her, however, if I find she has made things hot for him! If she has simply allowed him to trample upon her I don’t know that I shall even pity her. But I don’t think that’s very likely. I count upon finding that if she’s miserable she has at least made *him* so.’

Henrietta got up; these seemed to her, naturally, very dreadful expectations. She honestly believed she had no desire to see Mr Osmond unhappy; and indeed he could not be for her the subject of a flight of fancy. She was on the whole rather disappointed in the Countess, whose mind moved in a narrower circle than she had imagined, though with a capacity for coarseness even there. ‘It will be better if they love each other,’ she said for edification.

‘They can’t. He can’t love any one.’

‘I presumed that was the case. But it only aggravates my fear for Isabel. I shall positively start to-morrow.’

‘Isabel certainly has devotees,’ said the Countess, smiling very vividly. ‘I declare I don’t pity her.’

‘It may be I can’t assist her,’ Miss Stackpole pursued, as if it were well not to have illusions.

‘You can have wanted to, at any rate; that’s something. I believe that’s what you came from America for,’ the Countess suddenly added.

‘Yes, I wanted to look after her,’ Henrietta said serenely.

Her hostess stood there smiling at her with small bright eyes and an eager-looking nose; with cheeks into each of which a flush had come. ‘Ah, that’s very pretty—*c’est bien gentil!** Isn’t it what they call friendship?’

‘I don’t know what they call it. I thought I had better come.’

‘She’s very happy—she’s very fortunate,’ the Countess went on. ‘She has others besides.’ And then she broke out passionately. ‘She’s more fortunate than I! I’m as unhappy as she—I’ve a very bad husband; he’s a great deal worse than Osmond. And I’ve no friends. I thought I had, but they’re gone. No one, man or woman, would do for me what you’ve done for her.’

Henrietta was touched; there was nature in this bitter effusion. She gazed at her companion a

moment, and then: ‘Look here, Countess, I’ll do anything for you that you like. I’ll wait over and travel with you.’

‘Never mind,’ the Countess answered with a quick change of tone: ‘only describe me in the newspaper!’

Henrietta, before leaving her, however, was obliged to make her understand that she could give no fictitious representation of her journey to Rome. Miss Stackpole was a strictly veracious reporter. On quitting her she took the way to the Lung’ Arno, the sunny quay beside the yellow river where the bright-faced inns familiar to tourists stand all in a row. She had learned her way before this through the streets of Florence (she was very quick in such matters), and was therefore able to turn with great decision of step out of the little square which forms the approach to the bridge of the Holy Trinity. She proceeded to the left, toward the Ponte Vecchio,* and stopped in front of one of the hotels which overlook that delightful structure. Here she drew forth a small pocket-book, took from it a card and a pencil and, after meditating a moment, wrote a few words. It is our privilege to look over her shoulder, and if we exercise it we may read the brief query: ‘Could I see you this evening for a few moments on a very important matter?’ Henrietta added that she should start on the morrow for Rome. Armed with this little document she approached the porter, who now had taken up his station in the doorway, and asked if Mr Goodwood were at home. The porter replied, as porters always reply, that he had gone out about twenty minutes before; whereupon Henrietta presented her card and begged it might be handed him on his return. She left the inn and pursued her course along the quay to the severe portico of the Uffizi, through which she presently reached the entrance of the famous gallery of paintings. Making her way in, she ascended the high staircase which leads to the upper chambers. The long corridor, glazed on one side and decorated with antique busts, which gives admission to these apartments, presented an empty vista in which the bright winter light twinkled upon the marble floor. The gallery is very cold and during the midwinter weeks but scantily visited. Miss Stackpole may appear more ardent in her quest of artistic beauty than she has hitherto struck us as being, but she had after all her preferences and admirations. One of the latter was the little Correggio of the Tribune*—the Virgin kneeling down before the sacred infant, who lies in a litter of straw, and clapping her hands to him while he delightedly laughs and crows. Henrietta had a special devotion to this intimate scene—she thought it the most beautiful picture in the world. On her way, at present, from New York to Rome, she was spending but three days in Florence, and yet reminded herself that they must not elapse without her paying another visit to her favourite work of art. She had a great sense of beauty in all ways, and it involved a good many intellectual obligations. She was about to turn into the Tribune when a gentleman came out of it; whereupon she gave a little exclamation and stood before Caspar Goodwood.

‘I’ve just been at your hotel,’ she said. ‘I left a card for you.’

‘I’m very much honoured,’ Caspar Goodwood answered as if he really meant it.

‘It was not to honour you I did it; I’ve called on you before and I know you don’t like it. It was to talk to you a little about something.’

He looked for a moment at the buckle in her hat. ‘I shall be very glad to hear what you wish to say.’

‘You don’t like to talk with me,’ said Henrietta. ‘But I don’t care for that; I don’t talk for your amusement. I wrote a word to ask you to come and see me; but since I’ve met you here this will do as well.’

‘I was just going away,’ Goodwood stated; ‘but of course I’ll stop.’ He was civil, but not enthusiastic.

Henrietta, however, never looked for great professions, and she was so much in earnest that she was thankful he would listen to her on any terms. She asked him first, none the less, if he had seen all the pictures.

‘All I want to. I’ve been here an hour.’

‘I wonder if you’ve seen my Correggio,’ said Henrietta. ‘I came up on purpose to have a look at it.’ She went into the Tribune and he slowly accompanied her.

‘I suppose I’ve seen it, but I didn’t know it was yours. I don’t remember pictures—especially that sort.’ She had pointed out her favourite work, and he asked her if it was about Correggio she wished to talk with him.

‘No,’ said Henrietta, ‘it’s about something less harmonious!’ They had the small, brilliant room, a splendid cabinet of treasures, to themselves; there was only a custode hovering about the Medicean Venus.* ‘I want you to do me a favour,’ Miss Stackpole went on.

Caspar Goodwood frowned a little, but he expressed no embarrassment at the sense of not looking eager. His face was that of a much older man than our earlier friend. ‘I’m sure it’s something I shan’t like,’

he said rather loudly.

'No, I don't think you'll like it. If you did it would be no favour.'

'Well, let's hear it,' he went on in the tone of a man quite conscious of his patience.

'You may say there's no particular reason why you should do me a favour. Indeed I only know of one: the fact that if you'd let me I'd gladly do *you* one.' Her soft, exact tone, in which there was no attempt at effect, had an extreme sincerity; and her companion, though he presented rather a hard surface, couldn't help being touched by it. When he was touched he rarely showed it, however, by the usual signs; he neither blushed, nor looked away, nor looked conscious. He only fixed his attention more directly; he seemed to consider with added firmness. Henrietta continued therefore disinterestedly, without the sense of an advantage. 'I may say now, indeed—it seems a good time—that if I've ever annoyed you (and I think sometimes I have) it's because I knew I was willing to suffer annoyance for you. I've troubled you—doubtless. But I'd *take* trouble for you.'

Goodwood hesitated. 'You're taking trouble now.'

'Yes, I am—some. I want you to consider whether it's better on the whole that you should go to Rome.'

'I thought you were going to say that!' he answered rather artlessly.

'You *have* considered it then?'

'Of course I have, very carefully. I've looked all round it. Otherwise I shouldn't have come so far as this. That's what I stayed in Paris two months for. I was thinking it over.'

'I'm afraid you decided as you liked. You decided it was best because you were so much attracted.'

'Best for whom, do you mean?' Goodwood demanded.

'Well, for yourself first. For Mrs Osmond next.'

'Oh, it won't do *her* any good! I don't flatter myself that.'

'Won't it do her some harm?—that's the question.'

'I don't see what it will matter to her. I'm nothing to Mrs Osmond. But if you want to know, I do want to see her myself.'

'Yes, and that's why you go.'

'Of course it is. Could there be a better reason?'

'How will it help you?—that's what I want to know,' said Miss Stackpole.

'That's just what I can't tell you. It's just what I was thinking about in Paris.'

'It will make you more discontented.'

'Why do you say "more" so?' Goodwood asked rather sternly. 'How do you know I'm discontented?'

'Well,' said Henrietta, hesitating a little, 'you seem never to have cared for another.'

'How do you know what I care for?' he cried with a big blush. 'Just now I care to go to Rome.'

Henrietta looked at him in silence, with a sad yet luminous expression. 'Well,' she observed at last, 'I only wanted to tell you what I think; I had it on my mind. Of course you think it's none of my business. But nothing is any one's business on that principle.'

'It's very kind of you; I'm greatly obliged to you for your interest,' said Caspar Goodwood. 'I shall go to Rome and I shan't hurt Mrs Osmond.'

'You won't hurt her, perhaps. But will you help her?—that's the real issue.'

'Is she in need of help?' he asked slowly, with a penetrating look.

'Most women always are,' said Henrietta with conscientious evasiveness and generalising less hopefully than usual. 'If you go to Rome,' she added, 'I hope you'll be a true friend—not a selfish one!' And she turned off and began to look at the pictures.

Caspar Goodwood let her go and stood watching her while she wandered round the room; but after a moment he rejoined her. 'You've heard something about her here,' he then resumed. 'I should like to know what you've heard.'

Henrietta had never prevaricated in her life, and, though on this occasion there might have been a fitness in doing so, she decided, after thinking some minutes, to make no superficial exception. 'Yes, I've heard,' she answered; 'but as I don't want you to go to Rome I won't tell you.'

'Just as you please. I shall see for myself,' he said. Then inconsistently, for him, 'You've heard she's unhappy!' he added.

'Oh, you won't see that!' Henrietta exclaimed.

‘I hope not. When do you start?’

‘To-morrow, by the evening train. And you?’

Goodwood hung back; he had no desire to make his journey to Rome in Miss Stackpole’s company. His indifference to this advantage was not of the same character as Gilbert Osmond’s, but it had at this moment an equal distinctness. It was rather a tribute to Miss Stackpole’s virtues than a reference to her faults. He thought her very remarkable, very brilliant, and he had, in theory, no objection to the class to which she belonged. Lady correspondents appeared to him a part of the natural scheme of things in a progressive country, and though he never read their letters he supposed that they ministered somehow to social prosperity. But it was this very eminence of their position that made him wish Miss Stackpole didn’t take so much for granted. She took for granted that he was always ready for some allusion to Mrs Osmond; she had done so when they met in Paris, six weeks after his arrival in Europe, and she had repeated the assumption with every successive opportunity. He had no wish whatever to allude to Mrs Osmond; he was *not* always thinking of her; he was perfectly sure of that. He was the most reserved, the least colloquial of men, and this enquiring authoress was constantly flashing her lantern into the quiet darkness of his soul. He wished she didn’t care so much; he even wished, though it might seem rather brutal of him, that she would leave him alone. In spite of this, however, he just now made other reflections—which show how widely different, in effect, his ill-humour was from Gilbert Osmond’s. He desired to go immediately to Rome; he would have liked to go alone, in the night-train. He hated the European railway-carriages, in which one sat for hours in a vise, knee to knee and nose to nose with a foreigner to whom one presently found one’s self objecting with all the added vehemence of one’s wish to have the window open; and if they were worse at night even than by day, at least at night one could sleep and dream of an American saloon-car. But he couldn’t take a night-train when Miss Stackpole was starting in the morning; it struck him that this would be an insult to an unprotected woman. Nor could he wait until after she had gone unless he should wait longer than he had patience for. It wouldn’t do to start the next day. She worried him; she oppressed him; the idea of spending the day in a European railway-carriage with her offered a complication of irritations. Still, she was a lady travelling alone; it was his duty to put himself out for her. There could be no two questions about that; it was a perfectly clear necessity. He looked extremely grave for some moments and then said, wholly without the flourish of gallantry but in a tone of extreme distinctness, ‘Of course if you’re going tomorrow I’ll go too, as I may be of assistance to you.’

‘Well, Mr Goodwood, I should hope so!’ Henrietta returned imperturbably.

XLV

I HAVE already had reason to say that Isabel knew her husband to be displeased by the continuance of Ralph's visit to Rome. That knowledge was very present to her as she went to her cousin's hotel the day after she had invited Lord Warburton to give a tangible proof of his sincerity; and at this moment, as at others, she had a sufficient perception of the sources of Osmond's opposition. He wished her to have no freedom of mind, and he knew perfectly well that Ralph was an apostle of freedom. It was just because he was this, Isabel said to herself, that it was a refreshment to go and see him. It will be perceived that she partook of this refreshment in spite of her husband's aversion to it, that is partook of it, as she flattered herself, discreetly. She had not as yet undertaken to act in direct opposition to his wishes; he was her appointed and inscribed master; she gazed at moments with a sort of incredulous blankness at this fact. It weighed upon her imagination, however; constantly present to her mind were all the traditionary decencies and sanctities of marriage. The idea of violating them filled her with shame as well as with dread, for on giving herself away she had lost sight of this contingency in the perfect belief that her husband's intentions were as generous as her own. She seemed to see, none the less, the rapid approach of the day when she should have to take back something she had solemnly bestown. Such a ceremony would be odious and monstrous; she tried to shut her eyes to it meanwhile. Osmond would do nothing to help it by beginning first; he would put that burden upon her to the end. He had not yet formally forbidden her to call upon Ralph; but she felt sure that unless Ralph should very soon depart this prohibition would come. How could poor Ralph depart? The weather as yet made it impossible. She could perfectly understand her husband's wish for the event; she didn't, to be just, see how he *could* like her to be with her cousin. Ralph never said a word against him, but Osmond's sore, mute protest was none the less founded. If he should positively interpose, if he should put forth his authority, she would have to decide, and that wouldn't be easy. The prospect made her heart beat and her cheeks burn, as I say, in advance; there were moments when, in her wish to avoid an open rupture, she found herself wishing Ralph would start even at a risk. And it was of no use that, when catching herself in this state of mind, she called herself a feeble spirit, a coward. It was not that she loved Ralph less, but that almost anything seemed preferable to repudiating the most serious act—the single sacred act—of her life. That appeared to make the whole future hideous. To break with Osmond once would be to break for ever; any open acknowledgement of irreconcilable needs would be an admission that their whole attempt had proved a failure. For them there could be no condonement, no compromise, no easy forgetfulness, no formal readjustment. They had attempted only one thing, but that one thing was to have been exquisite. Once they missed it nothing else would do; there was no conceivable substitute for that success. For the moment, Isabel went to the Hôtel de Paris as often as she thought well; the measure of propriety was in the canon of taste, and there couldn't have been a better proof that morality was, so to speak, a matter of earnest appreciation. Isabel's application of that measure had been particularly free to-day, for in addition to the general truth that she couldn't leave Ralph to die alone she had something important to ask of him. This indeed was Gilbert's business as well as her own.

She came very soon to what she wished to speak of. 'I want you to answer me a question. It's about Lord Warburton.'

'I think I guess your question,' Ralph answered from his armchair, out of which his thin legs protruded at greater length than ever.

'Very possibly you guess it. Please then answer it.'

'Oh, I don't say I can do that.'

'You're intimate with him,' she said; 'you've a great deal of observation of him.'

'Very true. But think how he must dissimulate!'

'Why should he dissimulate? That's not his nature.'

'Ah, you must remember that the circumstances are peculiar,' said Ralph with an air of private amusement.

'To a certain extent—yes. But is he really in love?'

'Very much, I think. I can make that out.'

'Ah!' said Isabel with a certain dryness.

Ralph looked at her as if his mild hilarity had been touched with mystification. 'You say that as if you

were disappointed.'

Isabel got up, slowly smoothing her gloves and eyeing them thoughtfully. 'It's after all no business of mine.'

'You're very philosophic,' said her cousin. And then in a moment: 'May I enquire what you're talking about?'

Isabel stared. 'I thought you knew. Lord Warburton tells me he wants, of all things in the world, to marry Pansy. I've told you that before, without eliciting a comment from you. You might risk one this morning, I think. Is it your belief that he really cares for her?'

'Ah, for Pansy, no!' cried Ralph very positively.

'But you said just now he did.'

Ralph waited a moment. 'That he cared for you, Mrs Osmond.'

Isabel shook her head gravely. 'That's nonsense, you know.'

'Of course it is. But the nonsense is Warburton's, not mine.'

'That would be very tiresome.' She spoke, as she flattered herself, with much subtlety.

'I ought to tell you indeed,' Ralph went on, 'that to me he has denied it.'

'It's very good of you to talk about it together! Has he also told you that he's in love with Pansy?'

'He has spoken very well of her—very properly. He has let me know, of course, that he thinks she would do very well at Lockleigh.'

'Does he really think it?'

'Ah, what Warburton really thinks—!' said Ralph.

Isabel fell to smoothing her gloves again; they were long, loose gloves on which she could freely expend herself. Soon, however, she looked up, and then, 'Ah, Ralph, you give me no help!' she cried abruptly and passionately.

It was the first time she had alluded to the need for help, and the words shook her cousin with their violence. He gave a long murmur of relief, of pity, of tenderness; it seemed to him that at last the gulf between them had been bridged. It was this that made him exclaim in a moment: 'How unhappy you must be!'

He had no sooner spoken than she recovered her self-possession, and the first use she made of it was to pretend she had not heard him. 'When I talk of your helping me I talk great nonsense,' she said with a quick smile. 'The idea of my troubling you with my domestic embarrassments! The matter's very simple; Lord Warburton must get on by himself. I can't undertake to see him through.'

'He ought to succeed easily,' said Ralph.

Isabel debated. 'Yes—but he has not always succeeded.'

'Very true. You know, however, how that always surprised me. Is Miss Osmond capable of giving us a surprise?'

'It will come from him, rather. I seem to see that after all he'll let the matter drop.'

'He'll do nothing dishonourable,' said Ralph.

'I'm very sure of that. Nothing can be more honourable than for him to leave the poor child alone. She cares for another person, and it's cruel to attempt to bribe her by magnificent offers to give him up.'

'Cruel to the other person perhaps—the one she cares for. But Warburton isn't obliged to mind that.'

'No, cruel to her,' said Isabel. 'She would be very unhappy if she were to allow herself to be persuaded to desert poor Mr Rosier. That idea seems to amuse you; of course you're not in love with him. He has the merit—for Pansy—of being in love with Pansy. She can see at a glance that Lord Warburton isn't.'

'He'd be very good to her,' said Ralph.

'He has been good to her already. Fortunately, however, he has not said a word to disturb her. He could come and bid her good-bye tomorrow with perfect propriety.'

'How would your husband like that?'

'Not at all; and he may be right in not liking it. Only he must obtain satisfaction himself.'

'Has he commissioned you to obtain it?' Ralph ventured to ask.

'It was natural that as an old friend of Lord Warburton's—an older friend, that is, than Gilbert—I should take an interest in his intentions.'

'Take an interest in his renouncing them, you mean?'

Isabel hesitated, frowning a little. 'Let me understand. Are you pleading his cause?'

‘Not in the least. I’m very glad he shouldn’t become your stepdaughter’s husband. It makes such a very queer relation to you!’ said Ralph, smiling. ‘But I’m rather nervous lest your husband should think you haven’t pushed him enough.’

Isabel found herself able to smile as well as he. ‘He knows me well enough not to have expected me to push. He himself has no intention of pushing, I presume. I’m not afraid I shall not be able to justify myself!’ she said lightly.

Her mask had dropped for an instant, but she had put it on again, to Ralph’s infinite disappointment. He had caught a glimpse of her natural face and he wished immensely to look into it. He had an almost savage desire to hear her complain of her husband—hear her say that she should be held accountable for Lord Warburton’s defection. Ralph was certain that this was her situation; he knew by instinct, in advance, the form that in such an event Osmond’s displeasure would take. It could only take the meanest and cruellest. He would have liked to warn Isabel of it—to let her see at least how he judged for her and how he knew. It little mattered that Isabel would know much better; it was for his own satisfaction more than for hers that he longed to show her he was not deceived. He tried and tried again to make her betray Osmond; he felt cold-blooded, cruel, dishonourable almost, in doing so. But it scarcely mattered, for he only failed. What had she come for then, and why did she seem almost to offer him a chance to violate their tacit convention? Why did she ask him his advice if she gave him no liberty to answer her? How could they talk of her domestic embarrassments, as it pleased her humorously to designate them, if the principal factor was not to be mentioned? These contradictions were themselves but an indication of her trouble, and her cry for help, just before, was the only thing he was bound to consider. ‘You’ll be decidedly at variance, all the same,’ he said in a moment. And as she answered nothing, looking as if she scarce understood, ‘You’ll find yourselves thinking very differently,’ he continued.

‘That may easily happen, among the most united couples!’ She took up her parasol; he saw she was nervous, afraid of what he might say. ‘It’s a matter we can hardly quarrel about, however,’ she added; ‘for almost all the interest is on his side. That’s very natural. Pansy’s after all his daughter—not mine.’ And she put out her hand to wish him good-bye.

Ralph took an inward resolution that she shouldn’t leave him without his letting her know that he knew everything: it seemed too great an opportunity to lose. ‘Do you know what his interest will make him say?’ he asked as he took her hand. She shook her head, rather dryly—not discouragingly—and he went on. ‘It will make him say that your want of zeal is owing to jealousy.’ He stopped a moment; her face made him afraid.

‘To jealousy?’

‘To jealousy of his daughter.’

She blushed red and threw back her head. ‘You’re not kind,’ she said in a voice that he had never heard on her lips.

‘Be frank with me and you’ll see,’ he answered.

But she made no reply; she only pulled her hand out of his own, which he tried still to hold, and rapidly withdrew from the room. She made up her mind to speak to Pansy, and she took an occasion on the same day, going to the girl’s room before dinner. Pansy was already dressed; she was always in advance of the time: it seemed to illustrate her pretty patience and the graceful stillness with which she could sit and wait. At present she was seated, in her fresh array, before the bed-room fire; she had blown out her candles on the completion of her toilet, in accordance with the economical habits in which she had been brought up and which she was now more careful than ever to observe; so that the room was lighted only by a couple of logs. The rooms in Palazzo Roccanera were as spacious as they were numerous, and Pansy’s virginal bower was an immense chamber with a dark, heavily-timbered ceiling. Its diminutive mistress, in the midst of it, appeared but a speck of humanity, and as she got up, with quick deference, to welcome Isabel, the latter was more than ever struck with her shy sincerity. Isabel had a difficult task—the only thing was to perform it as simply as possible. She felt bitter and angry, but she warned herself against betraying this heat. She was afraid even of looking too grave, or at least too stern; she was afraid of causing alarm. But Pansy seemed to have guessed she had come more or less as a confessor; for after she had moved the chair in which she had been sitting a little nearer to the fire and Isabel had taken her place in it, she kneeled down on a cushion in front of her, looking up and resting her clasped hands on her stepmother’s knees. What Isabel wished to do was to hear from her own lips that her mind was not occupied with Lord Warburton; but if she desired the assurance she felt herself by no means at liberty to provoke it. The girl’s father would have qualified this as rank treachery; and indeed Isabel knew that if Pansy should display the smallest germ of a disposition to encourage Lord Warburton her own duty was to hold her tongue. It was difficult to interrogate without appearing to suggest; Pansy’s

supreme simplicity, an innocence even more complete than Isabel had yet judged it, gave to the most tentative enquiry something of the effect of an admonition. As she knelt there in the vague firelight, with her pretty dress dimly shining, her hands folded half in appeal and half in submission, her soft eyes, raised and fixed, full of the seriousness of the situation, she looked to Isabel like a childish martyr decked out for sacrifice and scarcely presuming even to hope to avert it. When Isabel said to her that she had never yet spoken to her of what might have been going on in relation to her getting married, but that her silence had not been indifference or ignorance, had only been the desire to leave her at liberty, Pansy bent forward, raised her face nearer and nearer, and with a little murmur which evidently expressed a deep longing, answered that she had greatly wished her to speak and that she begged her to advise her now.

'It's difficult for me to advise you,' Isabel returned. 'I don't know how I can undertake that. That's for your father; you must get his advice and, above all, you must act on it.'

At this Pansy dropped her eyes; for a moment she said nothing. 'I think I should like your advice better than papa's,' she presently remarked.

'That's not as it should be,' said Isabel coldly. 'I love you very much, but your father loves you better.'

'It isn't because you love me—it's because you're a lady,' Pansy answered with the air of saying something very reasonable. 'A lady can advise a young girl better than a man.'

'I advise you then to pay the greatest respect to your father's wishes.'

'Ah yes,' said the child eagerly, 'I must do that.'

'But if I speak to you now about your getting married it's not for your own sake, it's for mine,' Isabel went on. 'If I try to learn from you what you expect, what you desire, it's only that I may act accordingly.'

Pansy stared, and then very quickly, 'Will you do everything I want?' she asked.

'Before I say yes I must know what such things are.'

Pansy presently told her that the only thing she wanted in life was to marry Mr Rosier. He had asked her and she had told him she would do so if her papa would allow it. Now her papa wouldn't allow it.

'Very well then, it's impossible,' Isabel pronounced.

'Yes, it's impossible,' said Pansy without a sigh and with the same extreme attention in her clear little face.

'You must think of something else then,' Isabel went on; but Pansy, sighing at this, told her that she had attempted that feat without the least success.

'You think of those who think of you,' she said with a faint smile. 'I know Mr Rosier thinks of me.'

'He ought not to,' said Isabel loftily. 'Your father has expressly requested he shouldn't.'

'He can't help it, because he knows I think of *him*.'

'You shouldn't think of him. There's some excuse for him, perhaps; but there's none for you.'

'I wish you would try to find one,' the girl exclaimed as if she were praying to the Madonna.

'I should be very sorry to attempt it,' said the Madonna with unusual frigidity. 'If you knew some one else was thinking of you, would you think of him?'

'No one can think of me as Mr Rosier does; no one has the right.'

'Ah, but I don't admit Mr Rosier's right!' Isabel hypocritically cried.

Pansy only gazed at her, evidently much puzzled; and Isabel, taking advantage of it, began to represent to her the wretched consequences of disobeying her father. At this Pansy stopped her with the assurance that she would never disobey him, would never marry without his consent. And she announced, in the serenest, simplest tone, that, though she might never marry Mr Rosier, she would never cease to think of him. She appeared to have accepted the idea of eternal singleness; but Isabel of course was free to reflect that she had no conception of its meaning. She was perfectly sincere; she was prepared to give up her lover. This might seem an important step toward taking another, but for Pansy, evidently, it failed to lead in that direction. She felt no bitterness toward her father; there was no bitterness in her heart; there was only the sweetness of fidelity to Edward Rosier, and a strange, exquisite intimation that she could prove it better by remaining single than even by marrying him.

'Your father would like you to make a better marriage,' said Isabel. 'Mr Rosier's fortune is not at all large.'

'How do you mean better—if that would be good enough? And I have myself so little money; why should I look for a fortune?'

'Your having so little is a reason for looking for more.' With which Isabel was grateful for the dimness

of the room; she felt as if her face were hideously insincere. It was what she was doing for Osmond; it was what one had to do for Osmond! Pansy's solemn eyes, fixed on her own, almost embarrassed her; she was ashamed to think she had made so light of the girl's preference.

'What should you like me to do?' her companion softly demanded.

The question was a terrible one, and Isabel took refuge in timorous vagueness. 'To remember all the pleasure it's in your power to give your father.'

'To marry some one else, you mean—if he should ask me?'

For a moment Isabel's answer caused itself to be waited for; then she heard herself utter it in the stillness that Pansy's attention seemed to make. 'Yes—to marry some one else.'

The child's eyes grew more penetrating; Isabel believed she was doubting her sincerity, and the impression took force from her slowly getting up from her cushion. She stood there a moment with her small hands unclasped and then quavered out: 'Well, I hope no one will ask me!'

'There has been a question of that. Some one else would have been ready to ask you.'

'I don't think he can have been ready,' said Pansy.

'It would appear so—if he had been sure he'd succeed.'

'If he had been sure? Then he wasn't ready!'

Isabel thought this rather sharp; she also got up and stood a moment looking into the fire. 'Lord Warburton has shown you great attention,' she resumed; 'of course you know it's of him I speak.' She found herself, against her expectation, almost placed in the position of justifying herself; which led her to introduce this nobleman more crudely than she had intended.

'He has been very kind to me, and I like him very much. But if you mean that he'll propose for me I think you're mistaken.'

'Perhaps I am. But your father would like it extremely.'

Pansy shook her head with a little wise smile. 'Lord Warburton won't propose simply to please papa.'

'Your father would like you to encourage him,' Isabel went on mechanically.

'How can I encourage him?'

'I don't know. Your father must tell you that.'

Pansy said nothing for a moment; she only continued to smile as if she were in possession of a bright assurance. 'There's no danger—no danger!' she declared at last.

There was a conviction in the way she said this, and a felicity in her believing it, which conduced to Isabel's awkwardness. She felt accused of dishonesty, and the idea was disgusting. To repair her self-respect she was on the point of saying that Lord Warburton had let her know that there *was* a danger. But she didn't; she only said—in her embarrassment rather wide of the mark—that he surely had been most kind, most friendly.

'Yes, he has been very kind,' Pansy answered. 'That's what I like him for.'

'Why then is the difficulty so great?'

'I've always felt sure of his knowing that I don't want—what did you say I should do?—to encourage him. He knows I don't want to marry, and he wants me to know that he therefore won't trouble me. That's the meaning of his kindness. It's as if he said to me: "I like you very much, but if it doesn't please you I'll never say it again." I think that's very kind, very noble,' Pansy went on with deepening positiveness. 'That is all we've said to each other. And he doesn't care for me either. Ah no, there's no danger.'

Isabel was touched with wonder at the depths of perception of which this submissive little person was capable; she felt afraid of Pansy's wisdom—began almost to retreat before it. 'You must tell your father that,' she remarked reservedly.

'I think I'd rather not,' Pansy unreservedly answered.

'You oughtn't to let him have false hopes.'

'Perhaps not; but it will be good for me that he should. So long as he believes that Lord Warburton intends anything of the kind you say, papa won't propose any one else. And that will be an advantage for me,' said the child very lucidly.

There was something brilliant in her lucidity, and it made her companion draw a long breath. It relieved this friend of a heavy responsibility. Pansy had a sufficient illumination of her own, and Isabel felt that she herself just now had no light to spare from her small stock. Nevertheless it still clung to her that she must be loyal to Osmond, that she was on her honour in dealing with his daughter. Under the

influence of this sentiment she threw out another suggestion before she retired—a suggestion with which it seemed to her that she should have done her utmost. ‘Your father takes for granted at least that you would like to marry a nobleman.’

Pansy stood in the open doorway; she had drawn back the curtain for Isabel to pass. ‘I think Mr Rosier looks like one!’ she remarked very gravely.

XLVI

LORD WARBURTON was not seen in Mrs Osmond's drawing-room for several days, and Isabel couldn't fail to observe that her husband said nothing to her about having received a letter from him. She couldn't fail to observe, either, that Osmond was in a state of expectancy and that, though it was not agreeable to him to betray it, he thought their distinguished friend kept him waiting quite too long. At the end of four days he alluded to his absence.

'What has become of Warburton? What does he mean by treating one like a tradesman with a bill?'

'I know nothing about him,' Isabel said. 'I saw him last Friday at the German ball. He told me then that he meant to write to you.'

'He has never written to me.'

'So I supposed, from your not having told me.'

'He's an odd fish,' said Osmond comprehensively. And on Isabel's making no rejoinder he went on to enquire whether it took his lordship five days to indite a letter. 'Does he form his words with such difficulty?'

'I don't know,' Isabel was reduced to replying. 'I've never had a letter from him.'

'Never had a letter? I had an idea that you were at one time in intimate correspondence.'

She answered that this had not been the case, and let the conversation drop. On the morrow, however, coming into the drawing-room late in the afternoon, her husband took it up again.

'When Lord Warburton told you of his intention of writing what did you say to him?' he asked.

She just faltered. 'I think I told him not to forget it.'

'Did you believe there was a danger of that?'

'As you say, he's an odd fish.'

'Apparently he has forgotten it,' said Osmond. 'Be so good as to remind him.'

'Should you like me to write to him?' she demanded.

'I've no objection whatever.'

'You expect too much of me.'

'Ah yes, I expect a great deal of you.'

'I'm afraid I shall disappoint you,' said Isabel.

'My expectations have survived a good deal of disappointment.'

'Of course I know that. Think how I must have disappointed myself! If you really wish hands laid on Lord Warburton you must lay them yourself.'

For a couple of minutes Osmond answered nothing; then he said: 'That won't be easy, with you working against me.'

Isabel started; she felt herself beginning to tremble. He had a way of looking at her through half-closed eyelids, as if he were thinking of her but scarcely saw her, which seemed to her to have a wonderfully cruel intention. It appeared to recognise her as a disagreeable necessity of thought, but to ignore her for the time as a presence. That effect had never been so marked as now. 'I think you accuse me of something very base,' she returned.

'I accuse you of not being trustworthy. If he doesn't after all come forward it will be because you've kept him off. I don't know that it's base: it is the kind of thing a woman always thinks she may do. I've no doubt you've the finest ideas about it.'

'I told you I would do what I could,' she went on.

'Yes, that gained you time.'

It came over her, after he had said this, that she had once thought him beautiful. 'How much you must want to make sure of him!'* she exclaimed in a moment.

She had no sooner spoken than she perceived the full reach of her words, of which she had not been conscious in uttering them. They made a comparison between Osmond and herself, recalled the fact that she had once held this coveted treasure in her hand and felt herself rich enough to let it fall. A momentary exultation took possession of her—a horrible delight in having wounded him; for his face

instantly told her that none of the force of her exclamation was lost. He expressed nothing otherwise, however; he only said quickly: ‘Yes, I want it immensely.’

At this moment a servant came in to usher a visitor, and he was followed the next by Lord Warburton, who received a visible check on seeing Osmond. He looked rapidly from the master of the house to the mistress; a movement that seemed to denote a reluctance to interrupt or even a perception of ominous conditions. Then he advanced, with his English address, in which a vague shyness seemed to offer itself as an element of good breeding; in which the only defect was a difficulty in achieving transitions. Osmond was embarrassed; he found nothing to say; but Isabel remarked, promptly enough, that they had been in the act of talking about their visitor. Upon this her husband added that they hadn’t known what was become of him—they had been afraid he had gone away. ‘No,’ he explained, smiling and looking at Osmond; ‘I’m only on the point of going.’ And then he mentioned that he found himself suddenly recalled to England: he should start on the morrow or the day after. ‘I’m awfully sorry to leave poor Touchett!’ he ended by exclaiming.

For a moment neither of his companions spoke; Osmond only leaned back in his chair, listening. Isabel didn’t look at him; she could only fancy how he looked. Her eyes were on their visitor’s face, where they were the more free to rest that those of his lordship carefully avoided them. Yet Isabel was sure that had she met his glance she would have found it expressive. ‘You had better take poor Touchett with you,’ she heard her husband say, lightly enough, in a moment.

‘He had better wait for warmer weather,’ Lord Warburton answered. ‘I shouldn’t advise him to travel just now.’

He sat there a quarter of an hour, talking as if he might not soon see them again—unless indeed they should come to England, a course he strongly recommended. Why shouldn’t they come to England in the autumn?—that struck him as a very happy thought. It would give him such pleasure to do what he could for them—to have them come and spend a month with him. Osmond, by his own admission, had been to England but once; which was an absurd state of things for a man of his leisure and intelligence. It was just the country for him—he would be sure to get on well there. Then Lord Warburton asked Isabel if she remembered what a good time she had had there and if she didn’t want to try it again. Didn’t she want to see Gardencourt once more? Gardencourt was really very good. Touchett didn’t take proper care of it, but it was the sort of place you could hardly spoil by letting it alone. Why didn’t they come and pay Touchett a visit? He surely must have asked them. Hadn’t asked them? What an ill-mannered wretch!—and Lord Warburton promised to give the master of Gardencourt a piece of his mind. Of course it was a mere accident; he would be delighted to have them. Spending a month with Touchett and a month with himself, and seeing all the rest of the people they must know there, they really wouldn’t find it half bad. Lord Warburton added that it would amuse Miss Osmond as well, who had told him that she had never been to England and whom he had assured it was a country she deserved to see. Of course she didn’t need to go to England to be admired—that was her fate everywhere; but she would be an immense success there, she certainly would, if that was any inducement. He asked if she were not at home: couldn’t he say good-bye? Not that he liked goodbyes—he always funked them. When he left England the other day he hadn’t said good-bye to a two-legged creature. He had had half a mind to leave Rome without troubling Mrs Osmond for a final interview. What could be more dreary than final interviews? One never said the things one wanted—one remembered them all an hour afterwards. On the other hand one usually said a lot of things one shouldn’t, simply from a sense that one had to say something. Such a sense was upsetting; it muddled one’s wits. He had it at present, and that was the effect it produced on him. If Mrs Osmond didn’t think he spoke as he ought she must set it down to agitation; it was no light thing to part with Mrs Osmond. He was really very sorry to be going. He had thought of writing to her instead of calling—but he would write to her at any rate, to tell her a lot of things that would be sure to occur to him as soon as he had left the house. They must think seriously about coming to Lockleigh.

If there was anything awkward in the conditions of his visit or in the announcement of his departure it failed to come to the surface. Lord Warburton talked about his agitation; but he showed it in no other manner, and Isabel saw that since he had determined on a retreat he was capable of executing it gallantly. She was very glad for him; she liked him quite well enough to wish him to appear to carry a thing off. He would do that on any occasion—not from impudence but simply from the habit of success; and Isabel felt it out of her husband’s power to frustrate this faculty. A complex operation, as she sat there, went on in her mind. On one side she listened to their visitor; said what was proper to him; read, more or less, between the lines of what he said himself; and wondered how he would have spoken if he had found her alone. On the other she had a perfect consciousness of Osmond’s emotion. She felt almost sorry for him; he was condemned to the sharp pain of loss without the relief of cursing. He had had a

great hope, and now, as he saw it vanish into smoke, he was obliged to sit and smile and twirl his thumbs. Not that he troubled himself to smile very brightly; he treated their friend on the whole to as vacant a countenance as so clever a man could very well wear. It was indeed a part of Osmond's cleverness that he could look consummately uncompromised. His present appearance, however, was not a confession of disappointment; it was simply a part of Osmond's habitual system, which was to be inexpressive exactly in proportion as he was really intent. He had been intent on this prize from the first; but he had never allowed his eagerness to irradiate his refined face. He had treated his possible son-in–law as he treated every one—with an air of being interested in him only for his own advantage, not for any profit to a person already so generally, so perfectly provided as Gilbert Osmond. He would give no sign now of an inward rage which was the result of a vanished prospect of gain—not the faintest nor subtlest. Isabel could be sure of that, if it was any satisfaction to her. Strangely, very strangely, it was a satisfaction; she wished Lord Warburton to triumph before her husband, and at the same time she wished her husband to be very superior before Lord Warburton. Osmond, in his way, was admirable; he had, like their visitor, the advantage of an acquired habit. It was not that of succeeding, but it was something almost as good—that of not attempting. As he leaned back in his place, listening but vaguely to the other's friendly offers and suppressed explanations—as if it were only proper to assume that they were addressed essentially to his wife—he had at least (since so little else was left him) the comfort of thinking how well he personally had kept out of it, and how the air of indifference, which he was now able to wear, had the added beauty of consistency. It was something to be able to look as if the leave-taker's movements had no relation to his own mind. The latter did well, certainly; but Osmond's performance was in its very nature more finished. Lord Warburton's position was after all an easy one; there was no reason in the world why he shouldn't leave Rome. He had had beneficent inclinations, but they had stopped short of fruition; he had never committed himself, and his honour was safe. Osmond appeared to take but a moderate interest in the proposal that they should go and stay with him and in his allusion to the success Pansy might extract from their visit. He murmured a recognition, but left Isabel to say that it was a matter requiring grave consideration. Isabel, even while she made this remark, could see the great vista which had suddenly opened out in her husband's mind, with Pansy's little figure marching up the middle of it.

Lord Warburton had asked leave to bid good-bye to Pansy, but neither Isabel nor Osmond had made any motion to send for her. He had the air of giving out that his visit must be short; he sat on a small chair, as if it were only for a moment, keeping his hat in his hand. But he stayed and stayed; Isabel wondered what he was waiting for. She believed it was not to see Pansy; she had an impression that on the whole he would rather not see Pansy. It was of course to see herself alone—he had something to say to her. Isabel had no great wish to hear it, for she was afraid it would be an explanation, and she could perfectly dispense with explanations. Osmond, however, presently got up, like a man of good taste to whom it had occurred that so inveterate a visitor might wish to say just the last word of all to the ladies. 'I've a letter to write before dinner,' he said; 'you must excuse me. I'll see if my daughter's disengaged, and if she is she shall know you're here. Of course when you come to Rome you'll always look us up. Mrs Osmond will talk to you about the English expedition: she decides all those things.'

The nod with which, instead of a hand-shake, he wound up this little speech was perhaps rather a meagre form of salutation; but on the whole it was all the occasion demanded. Isabel reflected that after he left the room Lord Warburton would have no pretext for saying, 'Your husband's very angry'; which would have been extremely disagreeable to her. Nevertheless, if he had done so, she would have said: 'Oh, don't be anxious. He doesn't hate *you*: it's me that he hates!'

It was only when they had been left alone together that her friend showed a certain vague awkwardness—sitting down in another chair, handling two or three of the objects that were near him. 'I hope he'll make Miss Osmond come,' he presently remarked. 'I want very much to see her.'

'I'm glad it's the last time,' said Isabel.

'So am I. She doesn't care for me.'

'No, she doesn't care for you.'

'I don't wonder at it,' he returned. Then he added with inconsequence: 'You'll come to England, won't you?'

'I think we had better not.'

'Ah, you owe me a visit. Don't you remember that you were to have come to Lockleigh once, and you never did?'

'Everything's changed since then,' said Isabel.

‘Not changed for the worse, surely—as far as we’re concerned. To see you under my roof’—and he hung fire but an instant—‘would be a great satisfaction.’

She had feared an explanation; but that was the only one that occurred. They talked a little of Ralph, and in another moment Pansy came in, already dressed for dinner and with a little red spot in either cheek. She shook hands with Lord Warburton and stood looking up into his face with a fixed smile—a smile that Isabel knew, though his lordship probably never suspected it, to be near akin to a burst of tears.

‘I’m going away,’ he said. ‘I want to bid you good-bye.’

‘Good-bye, Lord Warburton.’ Her voice perceptibly trembled.

‘And I want to tell you how much I wish you may be very happy.’

‘Thank you, Lord Warburton,’ Pansy answered.

He lingered a moment and gave a glance at Isabel. ‘You ought to be very happy—you’ve got a guardian angel.’

‘I’m sure I shall be happy,’ said Pansy in the tone of a person whose certainties were always cheerful.

‘Such a conviction as that will take you a great way. But if it should ever fail you, remember—remember—’ And her interlocutor stammered a little. ‘Think of me sometimes, you know!’ he said with a vague laugh. Then he shook hands with Isabel in silence, and presently he was gone.

When he had left the room she expected an effusion of tears from her stepdaughter; but Pansy in fact treated her to something very different.

‘I think you *are* my guardian angel!’ she exclaimed very sweetly.

Isabel shook her head. ‘I’m not an angel of any kind. I’m at the most your good friend.’

‘You’re a very good friend then—to have asked papa to be gentle with me.’

‘I’ve asked your father nothing,’ said Isabel, wondering.

‘He told me just now to come to the drawing-room, and then he gave me a very kind kiss.’

‘Ah,’ said Isabel, ‘that was quite his own idea!’

She recognised the idea perfectly; it was very characteristic, and she was to see a great deal more of it. Even with Pansy he couldn’t put himself the least in the wrong. They were dining out that day, and after their dinner they went to another entertainment; so that it was not till late in the evening that Isabel saw him alone. When Pansy kissed him before going to bed he returned her embrace with even more than his usual munificence, and Isabel wondered if he meant it as a hint that his daughter had been injured by the machinations of her stepmother. It was a partial expression, at any rate, of what he continued to expect of his wife. She was about to follow Pansy, but he remarked that he wished she would remain; he had something to say to her. Then he walked about the drawing-room a little, while she stood waiting in her cloak.

‘I don’t understand what you wish to do,’ he said in a moment. ‘I should like to know—so that I may know how to act.’

‘Just now I wish to go to bed. I’m very tired.’

‘Sit down and rest; I shall not keep you long. Not there—take a comfortable place.’ And he arranged a multitude of cushions that were scattered in picturesque disorder upon a vast divan. This was not, however, where she seated herself; she dropped into the nearest chair. The fire had gone out; the lights in the great room were few. She drew her cloak about her; she felt mortally cold. ‘I think you’re trying to humiliate me,’ Osmond went on. ‘It’s a most absurd undertaking.’

‘I haven’t the least idea what you mean,’ she returned.

‘You’ve played a very deep game; you’ve managed it beautifully.’

‘What is it that I’ve managed?’

‘You’ve not quite settled it, however; we shall see him again.’ And he stopped in front of her, with his hands in his pockets, looking down at her thoughtfully, in his usual way, which seemed meant to let her know that she was not an object, but only a rather disagreeable incident, of thought.

‘If you mean that Lord Warburton’s under an obligation to come back you’re wrong,’ Isabel said. ‘He’s under none whatever.’

‘That’s just what I complain of. But when I say he’ll come back I don’t mean he’ll come from a sense of duty.’

‘There’s nothing else to make him. I think he has quite exhausted Rome.’

‘Ah no, that’s a shallow judgement. Rome’s inexhaustible.’ And Osmond began to walk about again.

‘However, about that perhaps there’s no hurry,’ he added. ‘It’s rather a good idea of his that we should go to England. If it were not for the fear of finding your cousin there I think I should try to persuade you.’

‘It may be that you’ll not find my cousin,’ said Isabel.

‘I should like to be sure of it. However, I shall be as sure as possible. At the same time I should like to see his house, that you told me so much about at one time: what do you call it?—Gardencourt. It must be a charming thing. And then, you know, I’ve a devotion to the memory of your uncle: you made me take a great fancy to him. I should like to see where he lived and died. That indeed is a detail. Your friend was right. Pansy ought to see England.’

‘I’ve no doubt she would enjoy it,’ said Isabel.

‘But that’s a long time hence; next autumn’s far off,’ Osmond continued; ‘and meantime there are things that more nearly interest us. Do you think me so very proud?’ he suddenly asked.

‘I think you very strange.’

‘You don’t understand me.’

‘No, not even when you insult me.’

‘I don’t insult you; I’m incapable of it. I merely speak of certain facts, and if the allusion’s an injury to you the fault’s not mine. It’s surely a fact that you have kept all this matter quite in your own hands.’

‘Are you going back to Lord Warburton?’ Isabel asked. ‘I’m very tired of his name.’

‘You shall hear it again before we’ve done with it.’

She had spoken of his insulting her, but it suddenly seemed to her that this ceased to be a pain. He was going down—down; the vision of such a fall made her almost giddy: that was the only pain. He was too strange, too different; he didn’t touch her. Still, the working of his morbid passion was extraordinary, and she felt a rising curiosity to know in what light he saw himself justified. ‘I might say to you that I judge you’ve nothing to say to me that’s worth hearing,’ she returned in a moment. ‘But I should perhaps be wrong. There’s a thing that would be worth my hearing—to know in the plainest words of what it is you accuse me.’

‘Of having prevented Pansy’s marriage to Warburton. Are those words plain enough?’

‘On the contrary, I took a great interest in it. I told you so; and when you told me that you counted on me—that I think was what you said—I accepted the obligation. I was a fool to do so, but I did it.’

‘You pretended to do it, and you even pretended reluctance to make me more willing to trust you. Then you began to use your ingenuity to get him out of the way.’

‘I think I see what you mean,’ said Isabel.

‘Where’s the letter you told me he had written me?’ her husband demanded.

‘I haven’t the least idea; I haven’t asked him.’

‘You stopped it on the way,’ said Osmond.

Isabel slowly got up; standing there in her white cloak, which covered her to her feet, she might have represented the angel of disdain, first cousin to that of pity. ‘Oh, Gilbert, for a man who was so fine—!’ she exclaimed in a long murmur.

‘I was never so fine as you. You’ve done everything you wanted. You’ve got him out of the way without appearing to do so, and you’ve placed me in the position in which you wished to see me—that of a man who has tried to marry his daughter to a lord, but has grotesquely failed.’

‘Pansy doesn’t care for him. She’s very glad he’s gone,’ Isabel said.

‘That has nothing to do with the matter.’

‘And he doesn’t care for Pansy.’

‘That won’t do; you told me he did. I don’t know why you wanted this particular satisfaction,’ Osmond continued; ‘you might have taken some other. It doesn’t seem to me that I’ve been presumptuous—that I have taken too much for granted. I’ve been very modest about it, very quiet. The idea didn’t originate with me. He began to show that he liked her before I ever thought of it. I left it all to you.’

‘Yes, you were very glad to leave it to me. After this you must attend to such things yourself.’

He looked at her a moment; then he turned away. ‘I thought you were very fond of my daughter.’

‘I’ve never been more so than to-day.’

‘Your affection is attended with immense limitations. However, that perhaps is natural.’

‘Is this all you wished to say to me?’ Isabel asked, taking a candle that stood on one of the tables.

‘Are you satisfied? Am I sufficiently disappointed?’

‘I don’t think that on the whole you’re disappointed. You’ve had another opportunity to try to stupefy me.’

‘It’s not that. It’s proved that Pansy can aim high.’

‘Poor little Pansy!’ said Isabel as she turned away with her candle.

XLVII

IT was from Henrietta Stackpole that she learned how Caspar Goodwood had come to Rome; an event that took place three days after Lord Warburton's departure. This latter fact had been preceded by an incident of some importance to Isabel—the temporary absence, once again, of Madame Merle, who had gone to Naples to stay with a friend, the happy possessor of a villa at Posilippo. Madame Merle had ceased to minister to Isabel's happiness, who found herself wondering whether the most discreet of women might not also by chance be the most dangerous. Sometimes, at night, she had strange visions; she seemed to see her husband and her friend—his friend—in dim, indistinguishable combination. It seemed to her that she had not done with her; this lady had something in reserve. Isabel's imagination applied itself actively to this elusive point, but every now and then it was checked by a nameless dread, so that when the charming woman was away from Rome she had almost a consciousness of respite. She had already learned from Miss Stackpole that Caspar Goodwood was in Europe, Henrietta having written to make it known to her immediately after meeting him in Paris. He himself never wrote to Isabel, and though he was in Europe she thought it very possible he might not desire to see her. Their last interview, before her marriage, had had quite the character of a complete rupture; if she remembered rightly he had said he wished to take his last look at her. Since then he had been the most discordant survival of her earlier time—the only one in fact with which a permanent pain was associated. He had left her that morning with a sense of the most superfluous of shocks: it was like a collision between vessels in broad daylight. There had been no mist, no hidden current to excuse it, and she herself had only wished to steer wide. He had bumped against her prow, however, while her hand was on the tiller, and—to complete the metaphor—had given the lighter vessel a strain which still occasionally betrayed itself in a faint creaking. It had been horrid to see him, because he represented the only serious harm that (to her belief) she had ever done in the world: he was the only person with an unsatisfied claim on her. She had made him unhappy, she couldn't help it; and his unhappiness was a grim reality. She had cried with rage, after he had left her, at—she hardly knew what: she tried to think it had been at his want of consideration. He had come to her with his unhappiness when her own bliss was so perfect; he had done his best to darken the brightness of those pure rays. He had not been violent, and yet there had been a violence in the impression. There had been a violence at any rate in something somewhere; perhaps it was only in her own fit of weeping and in that after-sense of the same which had lasted three or four days.

The effect of his final appeal had in short faded away, and all the first year of her marriage he had dropped out of her books. He was a thankless subject of reference; it was disagreeable to have to think of a person who was sore and sombre about you and whom you could yet do nothing to relieve. It would have been different if she had been able to doubt, even a little, of his unreconciled state, as she doubted of Lord Warburton's; unfortunately it was beyond question, and this aggressive, uncompromising look of it was just what made it unattractive. She could never say to herself that here was a sufferer who had compensations, as she was able to say in the case of her English suitor. She had no faith in Mr Goodwood's compensations and no esteem for them. A cotton-factory was not a compensation for anything—least of all for having failed to marry Isabel Archer. And yet, beyond that, she hardly knew what he had—save of course his intrinsic qualities. Oh, he was intrinsic enough; she never thought of his even looking for artificial aids. If he extended his business—that, to the best of her belief, was the only form exertion could take with him—it would be because it was an enterprising thing, or good for the business; not in the least because he might hope it would overlay the past. This gave his figure a kind of bareness and bleakness which made the accident of meeting it in memory or in apprehension a peculiar concussion; it was deficient in the social drapery commonly muffling, in an overcivilised age, the sharpness of human contacts. His perfect silence, moreover, the fact that she never heard from him and very seldom heard any mention of him, deepened this impression of his loneliness. She asked Lily for news of him, from time to time; but Lily knew nothing of Boston—her imagination was all bounded on the east by Madison Avenue. As time went on Isabel had thought of him oftener, and with fewer restrictions; she had had more than once the idea of writing to him. She had never told her husband about him—never let Osmond know of his visits to her in Florence; a reserve not dictated in the early period by a want of confidence in Osmond, but simply by the consideration that the young man's disappointment was not her secret but his own. It would be wrong of her, she had believed, to convey it to another, and Mr Goodwood's affairs could have, after all, little interest for Gilbert. When it had come

to the point she had never written to him; it seemed to her that, considering his grievance, the least she could do was to let him alone. Nevertheless she would have been glad to be in some way nearer to him. It was not that it ever occurred to her that she might have married him; even after the consequences of her actual union had grown vivid to her that particular reflection, though she indulged in so many, had not had the assurance to present itself. But on finding herself in trouble he had become a member of that circle of things with which she wished to set herself right. I have mentioned how passionately she needed to feel that her unhappiness should not have come to her through her own fault. She had no near prospect of dying, and yet she wished to make her peace with the world—to put her spiritual affairs in order. It came back to her from time to time that there was an account still to be settled with Caspar, and she saw herself disposed or able to settle it to-day on terms easier for him than ever before. Still, when she learned he was coming to Rome she felt all afraid; it would be more disagreeable for him than for any one else to make out—since he *would* make it out, as over a falsified balance-sheet or something of that sort—the intimate disarray of her affairs. Deep in her breast she believed that he had invested his all in her happiness, while the others had invested only a part. He was one more person from whom she should have to conceal her stress. She was reassured, however, after he arrived in Rome, for he spent several days without coming to see her.

Henrietta Stackpole, it may well be imagined, was much more punctual, and Isabel was largely favoured with the society of her friend. She threw herself into it, for now that she had made such a point of keeping her conscience clear, that was one way of proving she had not been superficial—the more so as the years, in their flight, had rather enriched than blighted those peculiarities which had been humorously criticised by persons less interested than Isabel, and which were still marked enough to give loyalty a spice of heroism. Henrietta was as keen and quick and fresh as ever, and as neat and bright and fair. Her remarkably open eyes, lighted like great glazed railway-stations,* had put up no shutters; her attire had lost none of its crispness, her opinions none of their national reference. She was by no means quite unchanged, however; it struck Isabel she had grown vague. Of old she had never been vague; though undertaking many enquiries at once, she had managed to be entire and pointed about each. She had a reason for everything she did; she fairly bristled with motives. Formerly, when she came to Europe it was because she wished to see it, but now, having already seen it, she had no such excuse. She didn't for a moment pretend that the desire to examine decaying civilisations had anything to do with her present enterprise; her journey was rather an expression of her independence of the old world than of a sense of further obligations to it. 'It's nothing to come to Europe,' she said to Isabel; 'it doesn't seem to me one needs so many reasons for that. It is something to stay at home; this is much more important.' It was not therefore with a sense of doing anything very important that she treated herself to another pilgrimage to Rome; she had seen the place before and carefully inspected it; her present act was simply a sign of familiarity, of her knowing all about it, of her having as good a right as any one else to be there. This was all very well, and Henrietta was restless; she had a perfect right to be restless too, if one came to that. But she had after all a better reason for coming to Rome than that she cared for it so little. Her friend easily recognised it, and with it the worth of the other's fidelity. She had crossed the stormy ocean in midwinter because she had guessed that Isabel was sad. Henrietta guessed a great deal, but she had never guessed so happily as that. Isabel's satisfactions just now were few, but even if they had been more numerous there would still have been something of individual joy in her sense of being justified in having always thought highly of Henrietta. She had made large concessions with regard to her, and had yet insisted that, with all abatements, she was very valuable. It was not her own triumph, however, that she found good; it was simply the relief of confessing to this confidant, the first person to whom she had owned it, that she was not in the least at her ease. Henrietta had herself approached this point with the smallest possible delay, and had accused her to her face of being wretched. She was a woman, she was a sister; she was not Ralph, nor Lord Warburton, nor Caspar Goodwood, and Isabel could speak.

'Yes, I'm wretched,' she said very mildly. She hated to hear herself say it; she tried to say it as judicially as possible.

'What does he do to you?' Henrietta asked, frowning as if she were enquiring into the operations of a quack doctor.

'He does nothing. But he doesn't like me.'

'He's very hard to please!' cried Miss Stackpole. 'Why don't you leave him?'

'I can't change that way,' Isabel said.

'Why not, I should like to know? You won't confess that you've made a mistake. You're too proud.'

'I don't know whether I'm too proud. But I can't publish my mistake. I don't think that's decent. I'd much rather die.'

‘You won’t think so always,’ said Henrietta.

‘I don’t know what great unhappiness might bring me to; but it seems to me I shall always be ashamed. One must accept one’s deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate. One can’t change that way,’ Isabel repeated.

‘You *have* changed, in spite of the impossibility. I hope you don’t mean to say you like him.’

Isabel debated. ‘No, I don’t like him. I can tell you, because I’m weary of my secret. But that’s enough; I can’t announce it on the housetops.’

Henrietta gave a laugh. ‘Don’t you think you’re rather too considerate?’

‘It’s not of him that I’m considerate—it’s of myself!’ Isabel answered.

It was not surprising Gilbert Osmond should not have taken comfort in Miss Stackpole; his instinct had naturally set him in opposition to a young lady capable of advising his wife to withdraw from the conjugal roof. When she arrived in Rome he had said to Isabel that he hoped she would leave her friend the interviewer alone; and Isabel had answered that he at least had nothing to fear from her. She said to Henrietta that as Osmond didn’t like her she couldn’t invite her to dine, but they could easily see each other in other ways. Isabel received Miss Stackpole freely in her own sitting-room, and took her repeatedly to drive, face to face with Pansy, who, bending a little forward, on the opposite seat of the carriage, gazed at the celebrated authoress with a respectful attention which Henrietta occasionally found irritating. She complained to Isabel that Miss Osmond had a little look as if she should remember everything one said. ‘I don’t want to be remembered that way,’ Miss Stackpole declared; ‘I consider that my conversation refers only to the moment, like the morning papers. Your stepdaughter, as she sits there, looks as if she kept all the back numbers and would bring them out some day against me.’ She could not teach herself to think favourably of Pansy, whose absence of initiative, of conversation, of personal claims, seemed to her, in a girl of twenty, unnatural and even uncanny. Isabel presently saw that Osmond would have liked her to urge a little the cause of her friend, insist a little upon his receiving her, so that he might appear to suffer for good manners’ sake. Her immediate acceptance of his objections put him too much in the wrong—it being in effect one of the disadvantages of expressing contempt that you cannot enjoy at the same time the credit of expressing sympathy. Osmond held to his credit, and yet he held to his objections—all of which were elements difficult to reconcile. The right thing would have been that Miss Stackpole should come to dine at Palazzo Roccanera once or twice, so that (in spite of his superficial civility, always so great) she might judge for herself how little pleasure it gave him. From the moment, however, that both the ladies were so unaccommodating, there was nothing for Osmond but to wish the lady from New York would take herself off. It was surprising how little satisfaction he got from his wife’s friends; he took occasion to call Isabel’s attention to it.

‘You’re certainly not fortunate in your intimates; I wish you might make a new collection,’ he said to her one morning in reference to nothing visible at the moment, but in a tone of ripe reflection which deprived the remark of all brutal abruptness. ‘It’s as if you had taken the trouble to pick out the people in the world that I have least in common with. Your cousin I have always thought a conceited ass—besides his being the most ill-favoured animal I know. Then it’s insufferably tiresome that one can’t tell him so; one must spare him on account of his health. His health seems to me the best part of him; it gives him privileges enjoyed by no one else. If he’s so desperately ill there’s only one way to prove it; but he seems to have no mind for that. I can’t say much more for the great Warburton. When one really thinks of it, the cool insolence of that performance was something rare! He comes and looks at one’s daughter as if she were a suite of apartments; he tries the door-handles and looks out of the windows, raps on the walls and almost thinks he’ll take the place. Will you be so good as to draw up a lease? Then, on the whole, he decides that the rooms are too small; he doesn’t think he could live on a third floor; he must look out for a *piano nobile*. And he goes away after having got a month’s lodging in the poor little apartment for nothing. Miss Stackpole, however, is your most wonderful invention. She strikes me as a kind of monster. One hasn’t a nerve in one’s body that she doesn’t set quivering. You know I never have admitted that she’s a woman. Do you know what she reminds me of? Of a new steel pen—the most odious thing in nature. She talks as a steel pen writes; aren’t her letters, by the way, on ruled paper? She thinks and moves and walks and looks exactly as she talks. You may say that she doesn’t hurt me inasmuch as I don’t see her. I don’t see her, but I hear her; I hear her all day long. Her voice is in my ears; I can’t get rid of it. I know exactly what she says, and every inflexion of the tone in which she says it. She says charming things about me, and they give you great comfort. I don’t like at all to think she talks about me—I feel as I should feel if I knew the footman were wearing my hat.’

Henrietta talked about Gilbert Osmond, as his wife assured him, rather less than he suspected. She had plenty of other subjects, in two of which the reader may be supposed to be especially interested. She

let her friend know that Caspar Goodwood had discovered for himself that she was unhappy, though indeed her ingenuity was unable to suggest what comfort he hoped to give her by coming to Rome and yet not calling on her. They met him twice in the street, but he had no appearance of seeing them; they were driving, and he had a habit of looking straight in front of him, as if he proposed to take in but one object at a time. Isabel could have fancied she had seen him the day before; it must have been with just that face and step that he had walked out of Mrs Touchett's door at the close of their last interview. He was dressed just as he had been dressed on that day, Isabel remembered the colour of his cravat; and yet in spite of this familiar look there was a strangeness in his figure too, something that made her feel it afresh to be rather terrible he should have come to Rome. He looked bigger and more overtopping than of old, and in those days he certainly reached high enough. She noticed that the people whom he passed looked back after him; but he went straight forward, lifting above them a face like a February sky.

Miss Stackpole's other topic was very different; she gave Isabel the latest news about Mr Bantling. He had been out in the United States the year before, and she was happy to say she had been able to show him considerable attention. She didn't know how much he had enjoyed it, but she would undertake to say it had done him good; he wasn't the same man when he left as he had been when he came. It had opened his eyes and shown him that England wasn't everything. He had been very much liked in most places, and thought extremely simple—more simple than the English were commonly supposed to be. There were people who had thought him affected; she didn't know whether they meant that his simplicity was an affectation. Some of his questions were too discouraging; he thought all the chambermaids were farmers' daughters—or all the farmers' daughters were chambermaids—she couldn't exactly remember which. He hadn't seemed able to grasp the great school system; it had been really too much for him. On the whole he had behaved as if there were too much of everything—as if he could only take in a small part. The part he had chosen was the hotel system and the river navigation. He had seemed really fascinated with the hotels; he had a photograph of every one he had visited. But the river steamers were his principal interest; he wanted to do nothing but sail on the big boats. They had travelled together from New York to Milwaukee, stopping at the most interesting cities on the route; and whenever they started afresh he had wanted to know if they could go by the steamer. He seemed to have no idea of geography —had an impression that Baltimore was a Western city and was perpetually expecting to arrive at the Mississippi. He appeared never to have heard of any river in America but the Mississippi and was unprepared to recognise the existence of the Hudson, though obliged to confess at last that it was fully equal to the Rhine. They had spent some pleasant hours in the palace-cars;* he was always ordering ice-cream from the coloured man. He could never get used to that idea—that you could get ice-cream in the cars. Of course you couldn't, nor fans, nor candy, nor anything in the English cars! He found the heat quite overwhelming, and she had told him she indeed expected it was the biggest he had ever experienced. He was now in England, hunting—'hunting round' Henrietta called it. These amusements were those of the American red men; we had left that behind long ago, the pleasures of the chase. It seemed to be generally believed in England that we wore tomahawks and feathers; but such a costume was more in keeping with English habits. Mr Bantling would not have time to join her in Italy, but when she should go to Paris again he expected to come over. He wanted very much to see Versailles again; he was very fond of the ancient *régime*. They didn't agree about that, but that was what she liked Versailles for, that you could see the ancient *régime* had been swept away. There were no dukes and marquises there now; she remembered on the contrary one day when there were five American families, walking all round. Mr Bantling was very anxious that she should take up the subject of England again, and he thought she might get on better with it now; England had changed a good deal within two or three years. He was determined that if she went there he should go to see his sister, Lady Pensil, and that this time the invitation should come to her straight. The mystery about that other one had never been explained.

Caspar Goodwood came at last to Palazzo Roccanera; he had written Isabel a note beforehand, to ask leave. This was promptly granted; she would be at home at six o'clock that afternoon. She spent the day wondering what he was coming for—what good he expected to get of it. He had presented himself hitherto as a person destitute of the faculty of compromise, who would take what he had asked for or take nothing. Isabel's hospitality, however, raised no questions, and she found no great difficulty in appearing happy enough to deceive him. It was her conviction at least that she deceived him, made him say to himself that he had been misinformed. But she also saw, so she believed, that he was not disappointed, as some other men, she was sure, would have been; he had not come to Rome to look for an opportunity. She never found out what he had come for; he offered her no explanation; there could be none but the very simple one that he wanted to see her. In other words he had come for his amusement. Isabel followed up this induction with a good deal of eagerness, and was delighted to have found a formula that would lay the ghost of this gentleman's ancient grievance. If he had come to Rome for his

amusement this was exactly what she wanted; for if he cared for amusement he had got over his heartache. If he had got over his heartache everything was as it should be and her responsibilities were at an end. It was true that he took his recreation a little stiffly, but he had never been loose and easy and she had every reason to believe he was satisfied with what he saw. Henrietta was not in his confidence, though he was in hers, and Isabel consequently received no side-light upon his state of mind. He was open to little conversation on general topics; it came back to her that she had said of him once, years before, 'Mr Goodwood speaks a good deal, but he doesn't talk.' He spoke a good deal now, but he talked perhaps as little as ever; considering, that is, how much there was in Rome to talk about. His arrival was not calculated to simplify her relations with her husband, for if Mr Osmond didn't like her friends Mr Goodwood had no claim upon his attention save as having been one of the first of them. There was nothing for her to say of him but that he was the very oldest; this rather meagre synthesis exhausted the facts. She had been obliged to introduce him to Gilbert; it was impossible she should not ask him to dinner, to her Thursday evenings, of which she had grown very weary, but to which her husband still held for the sake not so much of inviting people as of not inviting them.

To the Thursdays Mr Goodwood came regularly, solemnly, rather early; he appeared to regard them with a good deal of gravity. Isabel every now and then had a moment of anger; there was something so literal about him; she thought he might know that she didn't know what to do with him. But she couldn't call him stupid; he was not that in the least; he was only extraordinarily honest. To be as honest as that made a man very different from most people; one had to be almost equally honest with *him*. She made this latter reflection at the very time she was flattering herself she had persuaded him that she was the most light-hearted of women. He never threw any doubt on this point, never asked her any personal questions. He got on much better with Osmond than had seemed probable. Osmond had a great dislike to being counted on; in such a case he had an irresistible need of disappointing you. It was in virtue of this principle that he gave himself the entertainment of taking a fancy to a perpendicular Bostonian whom he had been depended upon to treat with coldness. He asked Isabel if Mr Goodwood also had wanted to marry her, and expressed surprise at her not having accepted him. It would have been an excellent thing, like living under some tall belfry which would strike all the hours and make a queer vibration in the upper air. He declared he liked to talk with the great Goodwood; it wasn't easy at first, you had to climb up an interminable steep staircase, up to the top of the tower; but when you got there you had a big view and felt a little fresh breeze. Osmond, as we know, had delightful qualities, and he gave Caspar Goodwood the benefit of them all. Isabel could see that Mr Goodwood thought better of her husband than he had ever wished to; he had given her the impression that morning in Florence of being inaccessible to a good impression. Gilbert asked him repeatedly to dinner, and Mr Goodwood smoked a cigar with him afterwards and even desired to be shown his collections. Gilbert said to Isabel that he was very original; he was as strong and of as good a style as an English portmanteau,—he had plenty of straps and buckles which would never wear out, and a capital patent lock. Caspar Goodwood took to riding on the Campagna and devoted much time to this exercise; it was therefore mainly in the evening that Isabel saw him. She bethought herself of saying to him one day that if he were willing he could render her a service. And then she added smiling:

'I don't know, however, what right I have to ask a service of you.'

'You're the person in the world who has most right,' he answered. 'I've given you assurances that I've never given any one else.'

The service was that he should go and see her cousin Ralph, who was ill at the Hôtel de Paris, alone, and be as kind to him as possible. Mr Goodwood had never seen him, but he would know who the poor fellow was; if she was not mistaken Ralph had once invited him to Gardencourt. Caspar remembered the invitation perfectly, and, though he was not supposed to be a man of imagination, had enough to put himself in the place of a poor gentleman who lay dying at a Roman inn. He called at the Hôtel de Paris and, on being shown into the presence of the master of Gardencourt, found Miss Stackpole sitting beside his sofa. A singular change had in fact occurred in this lady's relations with Ralph Touchett. She had not been asked by Isabel to go and see him, but on hearing that he was too ill to come out had immediately gone of her own motion. After this she had paid him a daily visit—always under the conviction that they were great enemies. 'Oh yes, we're intimate enemies,' Ralph used to say; and he accused her freely—as freely as the humour of it would allow—of coming to worry him to death. In reality they became excellent friends, Henrietta much wondering that she should never have liked him before. Ralph liked her exactly as much as he had always done; he had never doubted for a moment that she was an excellent fellow. They talked about everything and always differed; about everything, that is, but Isabel—a topic as to which Ralph always had a thin forefinger on his lips. Mr Bantling on the other hand proved a great resource; Ralph was capable of discussing Mr Bantling with Henrietta for hours. Discussion was

stimulated of course by their inevitable difference of view—Ralph having amused himself with taking the ground that the genial ex-guardsman was a regular Machiavelli. Caspar Goodwood could contribute nothing to such a debate; but after he had been left alone with his host he found there were various other matters they could take up. It must be admitted that the lady who had just gone out was not one of these; Caspar granted all Miss Stackpole's merits in advance, but had no further remark to make about her. Neither, after the first allusions, did the two men expatiate upon Mrs Osmond—a theme in which Goodwood perceived as many dangers as Ralph. He felt very sorry for that unclassable personage; he couldn't bear to see a pleasant man, so pleasant for all his queerness, so beyond anything to be done. There was always something to be done, for Goodwood, and he did it in this case by repeating several times his visit to the Hôtel de Paris. It seemed to Isabel that she had been very clever; she had artfully disposed of the superfluous Caspar. She had given him an occupation; she had converted him into a caretaker of Ralph. She had a plan of making him travel northward with her cousin as soon as the first mild weather should allow it. Lord Warburton had brought Ralph to Rome and Mr Goodwood should take him away. There seemed a happy symmetry in this, and she was now intensely eager that Ralph should depart. She had a constant fear he would die there before her eyes and a horror of the occurrence of this event at an inn, by her door, which he had so rarely entered. Ralph must sink to his last rest in his own dear house, in one of those deep, dim chambers of Gardencourt where the dark ivy would cluster round the edges of the glimmering window. There seemed to Isabel in these days something sacred in Gardencourt; no chapter of the past was more perfectly irrecoverable. When she thought of the months she had spent there the tears rose to her eyes. She flattered herself, as I say, upon her ingenuity, but she had need of all she could muster; for several events occurred which seemed to confront and defy her. The Countess Gemini arrived from Florence—arrived with her trunks, her dresses, her chatter, her falsehoods, her frivolity, the strange, the unholy legend of the number of her lovers. Edward Rosier, who had been away somewhere,—no one, not even Pansy, knew where,—reappeared in Rome and began to write her long letters, which she never answered. Madame Merle returned from Naples and said to her with a strange smile: 'What on earth did you do with Lord Warburton?' As if it were any business of hers!

XLVIII

ONE day, toward the end of February, Ralph Touchett made up his mind to return to England. He had his own reasons for this decision, which he was not bound to communicate; but Henrietta Stackpole, to whom he mentioned his intention, flattered herself that she guessed them. She forebore to express them, however; she only said, after a moment, as she sat by his sofa: 'I suppose you know you can't go alone?'

'I've no idea of doing that,' Ralph answered. 'I shall have people with me.'

'What do you mean by "people"? Servants whom you pay?'

'Ah,' said Ralph jocosely, 'after all, they're human beings.'

'Are there any women among them?' Miss Stackpole desired to know.

'You speak as if I had a dozen! No, I confess I haven't a soubrette* in my employment.'

'Well,' said Henrietta calmly, 'you can't go to England that way. You must have a woman's care.'

'I've had so much of yours for the past fortnight that it will last me a good while.'

'You've not had enough of it yet. I guess I'll go with you,' said Henrietta.

'Go with me?' Ralph slowly raised himself from his sofa.

'Yes, I know you don't like me, but I'll go with you all the same. It would be better for your health to lie down again.'

Ralph looked at her a little; then he slowly relapsed. 'I like you very much,' he said in a moment.

Miss Stackpole gave one of her infrequent laughs. 'You needn't think that by saying that you can buy me off. I'll go with you, and what is more I'll take care of you.'

'You're a very good woman,' said Ralph.

'Wait till I get you safely home before you say that. It won't be easy. But you had better go, all the same.'

Before she left him, Ralph said to her: 'Do you really mean to take care of me?'

'Well, I mean to try.'

'I notify you then that I submit. Oh, I submit!' And it was perhaps a sign of submission that a few minutes after she had left him alone he burst into a loud fit of laughter. It seemed to him so inconsequent, such a conclusive proof of his having abdicated all functions and renounced all exercise, that he should start on a journey across Europe under the supervision of Miss Stackpole. And the great oddity was that the prospect pleased him; he was gratefully, luxuriously passive. He felt even impatient to start; and indeed he had an immense longing to see his own house again. The end of everything was at hand; it seemed to him he could stretch out his arm and touch the goal. But he wanted to die at home; it was the only wish he had left—to extend himself in the large quiet room where he had last seen his father lie, and close his eyes upon the summer dawn.

That same day Caspar Goodwood came to see him, and he informed his visitor that Miss Stackpole had taken him up and was to conduct him back to England. 'Ah then,' said Caspar, 'I'm afraid I shall be a fifth wheel to the coach. Mrs Osmond has made *me* promise to go with you.'

'Good heavens—it's the golden age! You're all too kind.'

'The kindness on my part is to her; it's hardly to you.'

'Granting that, she's kind,' smiled Ralph.

'To get people to go with you? Yes, that's a sort of kindness,' Goodwood answered without lending himself to the joke. 'For myself, however,' he added, 'I'll go as far as to say that I would much rather travel with you and Miss Stackpole than with Miss Stackpole alone.'

'And you'd rather stay here than do either,' said Ralph. 'There's really no need of your coming. Henrietta's extraordinarily efficient.'

'I'm sure of that. But I've promised Mrs Osmond.'

'You can easily get her to let you off.'

'She wouldn't let me off for the world. She wants me to look after you, but that isn't the principal thing. The principal thing is that she wants me to leave Rome.'

'Ah, you see too much in it,' Ralph suggested.

‘I bore her,’ Goodwood went on; ‘she has nothing to say to me, so she invented that.’

‘Oh then, if it’s a convenience to her I certainly will take you with me. Though I don’t see why it should be a convenience,’ Ralph added in a moment.

‘Well,’ said Caspar Goodwood simply, ‘she thinks I’m watching her.’

‘Watching her?’

‘Trying to make out if she’s happy.’

‘That’s easy to make out,’ said Ralph. ‘She’s the most visibly happy woman I know.’

‘Exactly so; I’m satisfied,’ Goodwood answered dryly. For all his dryness, however, he had more to say. ‘I’ve been watching her; I was an old friend and it seemed to me I had the right. She pretends to be happy; that was what she undertook to be; and I thought I should like to see for myself what it amounts to. I’ve seen,’ he continued with a harsh ring in his voice, ‘and I don’t want to see any more. I’m now quite ready to go.’

‘Do you know it strikes me as about time you should?’ Ralph rejoined. And this was the only conversation these gentlemen had about Isabel Osmond.

Henrietta made her preparations for departure, and among them she found it proper to say a few words to the Countess Gemini, who returned at Miss Stackpole’s *pension* the visit which this lady had paid her in Florence.

‘You were very wrong about Lord Warburton,’ she remarked to the Countess. ‘I think it right you should know that.’

‘About his making love to Isabel? My poor lady, he was at her house three times a day. He has left traces of his passage!’ the Countess cried.

‘He wished to marry your niece; that’s why he came to the house.’

The Countess stared, and then with an inconsiderate laugh: ‘Is that the story that Isabel tells? It isn’t bad, as such things go. If he wishes to marry my niece, pray why doesn’t he do it? Perhaps he has gone to buy the wedding-ring and will come back with it next month, after I’m gone.’

‘No, he’ll not come back. Miss Osmond doesn’t wish to marry him.’

‘She’s very accommodating! I knew she was fond of Isabel, but I didn’t know she carried it so far.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ said Henrietta coldly, and reflecting that the Countess was unpleasantly perverse. ‘I really must stick to my point—that Isabel never encouraged the attentions of Lord Warburton.’

‘My dear friend, what do you and I know about it? All we know is that my brother’s capable of everything.’

‘I don’t know what your brother’s capable of,’ said Henrietta with dignity.

‘It’s not her encouraging Warburton that I complain of; it’s her sending him away. I want particularly to see him. Do you suppose she thought I would make him faithless?’ the Countess continued with audacious insistence. ‘However, she’s only keeping him, one can feel that. The house is full of him there; he’s quite in the air. Oh yes, he has left traces; I’m sure I shall see him yet.’

‘Well,’ said Henrietta after a little, with one of those inspirations which had made the fortune of her letters to the *Interviewer*, ‘perhaps he’ll be more successful with you than with Isabel!’

When she told her friend of the offer she had made Ralph Isabel replied that she could have done nothing that would have pleased her more. It had always been her faith that at bottom Ralph and this young woman were made to understand each other. ‘I don’t care whether he understands me or not,’ Henrietta declared. ‘The great thing is that he shouldn’t die in the cars.’

‘He won’t do that,’ Isabel said, shaking her head with an extension of faith.

‘He won’t if I can help it. I see you want us all to go. I don’t know what you want to do.’

‘I want to be alone,’ said Isabel.

‘You won’t be that so long as you’ve so much company at home.’

‘Ah, they’re part of the comedy. You others are spectators.’

‘Do you call it a comedy, Isabel Archer?’ Henrietta rather grimly asked.

‘The tragedy then if you like. You’re all looking at me; it makes me uncomfortable.’

Henrietta engaged in this act for a while. ‘You’re like the stricken deer, seeking the innermost shade. Oh, you do give me such a sense of helplessness!’ she broke out.

‘I’m not at all helpless. There are many things I mean to do.’

‘It’s not you I’m speaking of; it’s myself. It’s too much, having come on purpose, to leave you just as I find you.’

‘You don’t do that; you leave me much refreshed,’ Isabel said.

‘Very mild refreshment—sour lemonade! I want you to promise me something.’

‘I can’t do that. I shall never make another promise. I made such a solemn one four years ago, and I’ve succeeded so ill in keeping it.’

‘You’ve had no encouragement. In this case I should give you the greatest. Leave your husband before the worst comes; that’s what I want you to promise.’

‘The worst? What do you call the worst?’

‘Before your character gets spoiled.’

‘Do you mean my disposition? It won’t get spoiled,’ Isabel answered, smiling. ‘I’m taking very good care of it. I’m extremely struck,’ she added, turning away, ‘with the off-hand way in which you speak of a woman’s leaving her husband. It’s easy to see you’ve never had one!’

‘Well,’ said Henrietta as if she were beginning an argument, ‘nothing is more common in our Western cities, and it’s to them, after all, that we must look in the future.’ Her argument, however, does not concern this history, which has too many other threads to unwind. She announced to Ralph Touchett that she was ready to leave Rome by any train he might designate, and Ralph immediately pulled himself together for departure. Isabel went to see him at the last, and he made the same remark that Henrietta had made. It struck him that Isabel was uncommonly glad to get rid of them all.

For all answer to this she gently laid her hand on his, and said in a low tone, with a quick smile: ‘My dear Ralph—!’

It was answer enough, and he was quite contented. But he went on in the same way, jocosely, ingenuously: ‘I’ve seen less of you than I might, but it’s better than nothing. And then I’ve heard a great deal about you.’

‘I don’t know from whom, leading the life you’ve done.’

‘From the voices of the air! Oh, from no one else; I never let other people speak of you. They always say you’re “charming,” and that’s so flat.’

‘I might have seen more of you certainly,’ Isabel said. ‘But when one’s married one has so much occupation.’

‘Fortunately I’m not married. When you come to see me in England I shall be able to entertain you with all the freedom of a bachelor.’ He continued to talk as if they should certainly meet again, and succeeded in making the assumption appear almost just. He made no allusion to his term being near, to the probability that he should not outlast the summer. If he preferred it so, Isabel was willing enough; the reality was sufficiently distinct without their erecting fingerposts in conversation. That had been well enough for the earlier time, though about this, as about his other affairs, Ralph had never been egotistic. Isabel spoke of his journey, of the stages into which he should divide it, of the precautions he should take. ‘Henrietta’s my greatest precaution,’ he went on. ‘The conscience of that woman’s sublime.’

‘Certainly she’ll be very conscientious.’

‘Will be? She has been! It’s only because she thinks it’s her duty that she goes with me. There’s a conception of duty for you.’

‘Yes, it’s a generous one,’ said Isabel, ‘and it makes me deeply ashamed. I ought to go with you, you know.’

‘Your husband wouldn’t like that.’

‘No, he wouldn’t like it. But I might go, all the same.’

‘I’m startled by the boldness of your imagination. Fancy my being a cause of disagreement between a lady and her husband!’

‘That’s why I don’t go,’ said Isabel simply—yet not very lucidly.

Ralph understood well enough, however. ‘I should think so, with all those occupations you speak of.’

‘It isn’t that. I’m afraid,’ said Isabel. After a pause she repeated, as if to make herself, rather than him, hear the words: ‘I’m afraid.’

Ralph could hardly tell what her tone meant; it was so strangely deliberate—apparently so void of emotion. Did she wish to do public penance for a fault of which she had not been convicted? or were her words simply an attempt at enlightened self-analysis? However this might be, Ralph could not resist so easy an opportunity. ‘Afraid of your husband?’

‘Afraid of myself!’ she said, getting up. She stood there a moment and then added: ‘If I were afraid of my husband that would be simply my duty. That’s what women are expected to be.’

‘Ah yes,’ laughed Ralph; ‘but to make up for it there’s always some man awfully afraid of some woman!’

She gave no heed to this pleasantry, but suddenly took a different turn. ‘With Henrietta at the head of your little band,’ she exclaimed abruptly, ‘there will be nothing left for Mr Goodwood!’

‘Ah, my dear Isabel,’ Ralph answered, ‘he’s used to that. There *is* nothing left for Mr Goodwood.’

She coloured and then observed, quickly, that she must leave him.

They stood together a moment; both her hands were in both of his. ‘You’ve been my best friend,’ she said.

‘It was for you that I wanted—that I wanted to live. But I’m of no use to you.’

Then it came over her more poignantly that she should not see him again. She could not accept that; she could not part with him that way. ‘If you should send for me I’d come,’ she said at last.

‘Your husband won’t consent to that.’

‘Oh yes, I can arrange it.’

‘I shall keep that for my last pleasure!’ said Ralph.

In answer to which she simply kissed him. It was a Thursday, and that evening Caspar Goodwood came to Palazzo Roccanera. He was among the first to arrive, and he spent some time in conversation with Gilbert Osmond, who almost always was present when his wife received. They sat down together, and Osmond, talkative, communicative, expansive, seemed possessed with a kind of intellectual gaiety. He leaned back with his legs crossed, lounging and chatting, while Goodwood, more restless, but not at all lively, shifted his position, played with his hat, made the little sofa creak beneath him. Osmond’s face wore a sharp, aggressive smile; he was as a man whose perceptions have been quickened by good news. He remarked to Goodwood that he was sorry they were to lose him; he himself should particularly miss him. He saw so few intelligent men—they were surprisingly scarce in Rome. He must be sure to come back; there was something very refreshing, to an inveterate Italian like himself, in talking with a genuine outsider.

‘I’m very fond of Rome, you know,’ Osmond said; ‘but there’s nothing I like better than to meet people who haven’t that superstition. The modern world’s after all very fine. Now you’re thoroughly modern and yet are not at all common. So many of the moderns we see are such very poor stuff. If they’re the children of the future we’re willing to die young. Of course the ancients too are often very tiresome. My wife and I like everything that’s really new—not the mere pretence of it. There’s nothing new, unfortunately, in ignorance and stupidity. We see plenty of that in forms that offer themselves as a revelation of progress, of light. A revelation of vulgarity! There’s a certain kind of vulgarity which I believe is really new; I don’t think there ever was anything like it before. Indeed I don’t find vulgarity, at all, before the present century. You see a faint menace of it here and there in the last, but to-day the air has grown so dense that delicate things are literally not recognised. Now, we’ve *liked you*—!’ With which he hesitated a moment, laying his hand gently on Goodwood’s knee and smiling with a mixture of assurance and embarrassment. ‘I’m going to say something extremely offensive and patronising, but you must let me have the satisfaction of it. We’ve liked you because—because you’ve reconciled us a little to the future. If there are to be a certain number of people like you—*á la bonne heure!** I’m talking for my wife as well as for myself, you see. She speaks for me, my wife; why shouldn’t I speak for her? We’re as united, you know, as the candlestick and the snuffers. Am I assuming too much when I say that I think I’ve understood from you that your occupations have been—a—commercial? There’s a danger in that, you know; but it’s the way you have escaped that strikes us. Excuse me if my little compliment seems in execrable taste; fortunately my wife doesn’t hear me. What I mean is that you *might have been*—a—what I was mentioning just now. The whole American world was in a conspiracy to make you so. But you resisted, you’ve something about you that saved you. And yet you’re so modern, so modern; the most modern man we know! We shall always be delighted to see you again.’

I have said that Osmond was in good humour, and these remarks will give ample evidence of the fact. They were infinitely more personal than he usually cared to be, and if Caspar Goodwood had attended to them more closely he might have thought that the defence of delicacy was in rather odd hands. We may believe, however, that Osmond knew very well what he was about, and that if he chose to use the tone of patronage with a grossness not in his habits he had an excellent reason for the escapade. Goodwood had only a vague sense that he was laying it on somehow; he scarcely knew where the mixture was applied. Indeed he scarcely knew what Osmond was talking about; he wanted to be alone with Isabel, and that idea spoke louder to him than her husband’s perfectly-pitched voice. He watched her talking with other

people and wondered when she would be at liberty and whether he might ask her to go into one of the other rooms. His humour was not, like Osmond's, of the best; there was an element of dull rage in his consciousness of things. Up to this time he had not disliked Osmond personally; he had only thought him very well-informed and obliging and more than he had supposed like the person whom Isabel Archer would naturally marry. His host had won in the open field a great advantage over him, and Goodwood had too strong a sense of fair play to have been moved to underrate him on that account. He had not tried positively to think well of him; this was a flight of sentimental benevolence of which, even in the days when he came nearest to reconciling himself to what had happened, Goodwood was quite incapable. He accepted him as rather a brilliant personage of the amateurish kind, afflicted with a redundancy of leisure which it amused him to work off in little refinements of conversation. But he only half trusted him; he could never make out why the deuce Osmond should lavish refinements of any sort upon *him*. It made him suspect that he found some private entertainment in it, and it ministered to a general impression that his triumphant rival had in his composition a streak of perversity.* He knew indeed that Osmond could have no reason to wish him evil; he had nothing to fear from him. He had carried off a supreme advantage and could afford to be kind to a man who had lost everything. It was true that Goodwood had at times grimly wished he were dead and would have liked to kill him; but Osmond had no means of knowing this, for practice had made the younger man perfect in the art of appearing inaccessible to-day to any violent emotion. He cultivated this art in order to deceive himself, but it was others that he deceived first. He cultivated it, moreover, with very limited success; of which there could be no better proof than the deep, dumb irritation that reigned in his soul when he heard Osmond speak of his wife's feelings as if he were commissioned to answer for them.

That was all he had had an ear for in what his host said to him this evening; he had been conscious that Osmond made more of a point even than usual of referring to the conjugal harmony prevailing at Palazzo Roccanera. He had been more careful than ever to speak as if he and his wife had all things in sweet community and it were as natural to each of them to say 'we' as to say 'I.' In all this there was an air of intention that had puzzled and angered our poor Bostonian, who could only reflect for his comfort that Mrs Osmond's relations with her husband were none of his business. He had no proof whatever that her husband misrepresented her, and if he judged her by the surface of things was bound to believe that she liked her life. She had never given him the faintest sign of discontent. Miss Stackpole had told him that she had lost her illusions, but writing for the papers had made Miss Stackpole sensational. She was too fond of early news. Moreover, since her arrival in Rome she had been much on her guard; she had pretty well ceased to flash her lantern at him. This indeed, it may be said for her, would have been quite against her conscience. She had now seen the reality of Isabel's situation, and it had inspired her with a just reserve. Whatever could be done to improve it the most useful form of assistance would not be to inflame her former lovers with a sense of her wrongs. Miss Stackpole continued to take a deep interest in the state of Mr Goodwood's feelings, but she showed it at present only by sending him choice extracts, humorous and other, from the American journals, of which she received several by every post and which she always perused with a pair of scissors in her hand. The articles she cut out she placed in an envelope addressed to Mr Goodwood, which she left with her own hand at his hotel. He never asked her a question about Isabel: hadn't he come five thousand miles to see for himself? He was thus not in the least authorised to think Mrs Osmond unhappy; but the very absence of authorisation operated as an irritant, ministered to the harshness with which, in spite of his theory that he had ceased to care, he now recognised that, so far as she was concerned, the future had nothing more for him. He had not even the satisfaction of knowing the truth; apparently he could not even be trusted to respect her if she *were* unhappy. He was hopeless, helpless, useless. To this last character she had called his attention by her ingenious plan for making him leave Rome. He had no objection whatever to doing what he could for her cousin, but it made him grind his teeth to think that of all the services she might have asked of him this was the one she had been eager to select. There had been no danger of her choosing one that would have kept him in Rome.

To-night what he was chiefly thinking of was that he was to leave her to-morrow and that he had gained nothing by coming but the knowledge that he was as little wanted as ever. About herself he had gained no knowledge; she was imperturbable, inscrutable, impenetrable. He felt the old bitterness, which he had tried so hard to swallow, rise again in his throat, and he knew there are disappointments that last as long as life. Osmond went on talking; Goodwood was vaguely aware that he was touching again upon his perfect intimacy with his wife. It seemed to him for a moment that the man had a kind of demonic imagination; it was impossible that without malice he should have selected so unusual a topic. But what did it matter, after all, whether he were demonic or not, and whether she loved him or hated him? She might hate him to the death without one's gaining a straw one's self. 'You travel, by the by, with Ralph

Touchett,' Osmond said. 'I suppose that means you'll move slowly?'

'I don't know. I shall do just as he likes.'

'You're very accommodating. We're immensely obliged to you; you must really let me say it. My wife has probably expressed to you what we feel. Touchett has been on our minds all winter; it has looked more than once as if he would never leave Rome. He ought never to have come; it's worse than an imprudence for people in that state to travel; it's a kind of indelicacy. I wouldn't for the world be under such an obligation to Touchett as he has been to—to my wife and me. Other people inevitably have to look after him, and every one isn't so generous as you.'

'I've nothing else to do,' Caspar said dryly.

Osmond looked at him a moment askance. 'You ought to marry, and then you'd have plenty to do! It's true that in that case you wouldn't be quite so available for deeds of mercy.'

'Do you find that as a married man you're so much occupied?' the young man mechanically asked.

'Ah, you see, being married's in itself an occupation. It isn't always active; it's often passive; but that takes even more attention. Then my wife and I do so many things together. We read, we study, we make music, we walk, we drive—we talk even, as when we first knew each other. I delight, to this hour, in my wife's conversation. If you're ever bored take my advice and get married. Your wife indeed may bore you, in that case; but you'll never bore yourself. You'll always have something to say to yourself—always have a subject of reflection.'

'I'm not bored,' said Goodwood. 'I've plenty to think about and to say to myself.'

'More than to say to others!' Osmond exclaimed with a light laugh. 'Where shall you go next? I mean after you've consigned Touchett to his natural caretakers—I believe his mother's at last coming back to look after him. That little lady's superb; she neglects her duties with a finish—! Perhaps you'll spend the summer in England?'

'I don't know. I've no plans.'

'Happy man! That's a little bleak, but it's very free.'

'Oh yes, I'm very free.'

'Free to come back to Rome I hope,' said Osmond as he saw a group of new visitors enter the room. 'Remember that when you do come we count on you!'

Goodwood had meant to go away early, but the evening elapsed without his having a chance to speak to Isabel otherwise than as one of several associated interlocutors. There was something perverse in the inveteracy with which she avoided him; his unquenchable rancour discovered an intention where there was certainly no appearance of one. There was absolutely no appearance of one. She met his eyes with her clear hospitable smile, which seemed almost to ask that he would come and help her to entertain some of her visitors. To such suggestions, however, he opposed but a stiff impatience. He wandered about and waited; he talked to the few people he knew, who found him for the first time rather self-contradictory. This was indeed rare with Caspar Goodwood, though he often contradicted others. There was often music at Palazzo Roccanera, and it was usually very good. Under cover of the music he managed to contain himself; but toward the end, when he saw the people beginning to go, he drew near to Isabel and asked her in a low tone if he might not speak to her in one of the other rooms, which he had just assured himself was empty. She smiled as if she wished to oblige him but found herself absolutely prevented. 'I'm afraid it's impossible. People are saying good-night, and I must be where they can see me.'

'I shall wait till they are all gone then.'

She hesitated a moment. 'Ah, that will be delightful!' she exclaimed.

And he waited, though it took a long time yet. There were several people, at the end, who seemed tethered to the carpet. The Countess Gemini, who was never herself till midnight, as she said, displayed no consciousness that the entertainment was over; she had still a little circle of gentlemen in front of the fire, who every now and then broke into a united laugh. Osmond had disappeared—he never bade goodbye to people; and as the Countess was extending her range, according to her custom at this period of the evening, Isabel had sent Pansy to bed. Isabel sat a little apart; she too appeared to wish her sister-in-law would sound a lower note and let the last loiterers depart in peace.

'May I not say a word to you now?' Goodwood presently asked her.

She got up immediately, smiling. 'Certainly, we'll go somewhere else if you like.' They went together, leaving the Countess with her little circle, and for a moment after they had crossed the threshold neither of them spoke. Isabel would not sit down; she stood in the middle of the room slowly fanning herself; she

had for him the same familiar grace. She seemed to wait for him to speak. Now that he was alone with her all the passion he had never stifled surged into his senses; it hummed in his eyes and made things swim round him. The bright, empty room grew dim and blurred, and through the heaving veil he felt her hover before him with gleaming eyes and parted lips. If he had seen more distinctly he would have perceived her smile was fixed and a trifle forced—that she was frightened at what she saw in his own face. 'I suppose you wish to bid me good-bye?' she said.

'Yes—but I don't like it. I don't want to leave Rome,' he answered with almost plaintive honesty.

'I can well imagine. It's wonderfully good of you. I can't tell you how kind I think you.'

For a moment more he said nothing. 'With a few words like that you make me go.'

'You must come back some day,' she brightly returned.

'Some day? You mean as long a time hence as possible.'

'Oh no; I don't mean all that.'

'What *do* you mean? I don't understand! But I said I'd go, and I'll go,' Goodwood added.

'Come back whenever you like,' said Isabel with attempted lightness.

'I don't care a straw for your cousin!' Caspar broke out.

'Is that what you wished to tell me?'

'No, no; I didn't want to tell you anything. I wanted to ask you—' he paused a moment, and then —'what have you really made of your life?' he said, in a low, quick tone. He paused again, as if for an answer; but she said nothing, and he went on: 'I can't understand, I can't penetrate you! What am I to believe—what do you want me to think?' Still she said nothing; she only stood looking at him, now quite without pretending to ease. 'I'm told you're unhappy, and if you are I should like to know it. That would be something for me. But you yourself say you're happy, and you're somehow so still, so smooth, so hard. You're completely changed. You conceal everything; I haven't really come near you.'

'You come very near,' Isabel said gently, but in a tone of warning.

'And yet I don't touch you! I want to know the truth. Have you done well?'

'You ask a great deal.'

'Yes—I've always asked a great deal. Of course you won't tell me. I shall never know if you can help it. And then it's none of my business.' He had spoken with a visible effort to control himself, to give a considerate form to an inconsiderate state of mind. But the sense that it was his last chance, that he loved her and had lost her, that she would think him a fool whatever he should say, suddenly gave him a lash and added a deep vibration to his low voice. 'You're perfectly inscrutable, and that's what makes me think you've something to hide. I tell you I don't care a straw for your cousin, but I don't mean that I don't like him. I mean that it isn't because I like him that I go away with him. I'd go if he were an idiot and you should have asked me. If you should ask me I'd go to Siberia tomorrow. Why do you want me to leave the place? You must have some reason for that; if you were as contented as you pretend you are you wouldn't care. I'd rather know the truth about you, even if it's damnable, than have come here for nothing. That isn't what I came for. I thought I shouldn't care. I came because I wanted to assure myself that I needn't think of you any more. I haven't thought of anything else, and you're quite right to wish me to go away. But if I must go, there's no harm in my letting myself out for a single moment, is there? If you're really hurt—if he hurts you—nothing *I* say will hurt you. When I tell you I love you it's simply what I came for. I thought it was for something else; but it was for that. I shouldn't say it if I didn't believe I should never see you again. It's the last time—let me pluck a single flower! I've no right to say that, I know; and you've no right to listen. But you don't listen; you never listen, you're always thinking of something else. After this I must go, of course; so I shall at least have a reason. Your asking me is no reason, not a real one. I can't judge by your husband,' he went on irrelevantly, almost incoherently; 'I don't understand him; he tells me you adore each other. Why does he tell me that? What business is it of mine? When I say that to you, you look strange. But you always look strange. Yes, you've something to hide. It's none of my business—very true. But I love you,' said Caspar Goodwood.

As he said, she looked strange. She turned her eyes to the door by which they had entered and raised her fan as if in warning. 'You've behaved so well; don't spoil it,' she uttered softly.

'No one hears me. It's wonderful what you tried to put me off with. I love you as I've never loved you.'

'I know it. I knew it as soon as you consented to go.'

'You can't help it—of course not. You would if you could, but you can't, unfortunately. Unfortunately for me, I mean. I ask nothing—nothing, that is, I shouldn't. But I do ask one sole satisfaction: that you tell

me—that you tell me—!'

'That I tell you what?'

'Whether I may pity you.'

'Should you like that?' Isabel asked, trying to smile again.

'To pity you? Most assuredly! That at least would be doing something. I'd give my life to it.'

She raised her fan to her face, which it covered all except her eyes. They rested a moment on his. 'Don't give your life to it; but give a thought to it every now and then.' And with that she went back to the Countess Gemini.

XLIX

MADAME MERLE had not made her appearance at Palazzo Roccanera on the evening of that Thursday of which I have narrated some of the incidents, and Isabel, though she observed her absence, was not surprised by it. Things had passed between them which added no stimulus to sociability, and to appreciate which we must glance a little backward. It has been mentioned that Madame Merle returned from Naples shortly after Lord Warburton had left Rome, and that on her first meeting with Isabel (whom, to do her justice, she came immediately to see) her first utterance had been an enquiry as to the whereabouts of this nobleman, for whom she appeared to hold her dear friend accountable.

'Please don't talk of him,' said Isabel for answer; 'we've heard so much of him of late.'

Madame Merle bent her head on one side a little, protestingly, and smiled at the left corner of her mouth. 'You've heard, yes. But you must remember that I've not, in Naples. I hoped to find him here and to be able to congratulate Pansy.'

'You may congratulate Pansy still; but not on marrying Lord Warburton.'

'How you say that! Don't you know I had set my heart on it?' Madame Merle asked with a great deal of spirit, but still with the intonation of good humour.

Isabel was discomposed, but she was determined to be goodhumoured too. 'You shouldn't have gone to Naples then. You should have stayed here to watch the affair.'

'I had too much confidence in you. But do you think it's too late?'

'You had better ask Pansy,' said Isabel.

'I shall ask her what you've said to her.'

These words seemed to justify the impulse of self-defence aroused on Isabel's part by her perceiving that her visitor's attitude was a critical one. Madame Merle, as we know, had been very discreet hitherto; she had never criticised; she had been markedly afraid of intermeddling. But apparently she had only reserved herself for this occasion, since she now had a dangerous quickness in her eye and an air of irritation which even her admirable ease was not able to transmute. She had suffered a disappointment which excited Isabel's surprise—our heroine having no knowledge of her zealous interest in Pansy's marriage; and she betrayed it in a manner which quickened Mrs Osmond's alarm. More clearly than ever before Isabel heard a cold, mocking voice proceed from she knew not where, in the dim void that surrounded her, and declare that this bright, strong, definite, worldly woman, this incarnation of the practical, the personal, the immediate, was a powerful agent in her destiny. She was nearer to her than Isabel had yet discovered, and her nearness was not the charming accident she had so long supposed. The sense of accident indeed had died within her that day when she happened to be struck with the manner in which the wonderful lady and her own husband sat together in private. No definite suspicion had as yet taken its place; but it was enough to make her view this friend with a different eye, to have been led to reflect that there was more intention in her past behaviour than she had allowed for at the time. Ah yes, there had been intention, there had been intention, Isabel said to herself; and she seemed to wake from a long pernicious dream. What was it that brought home to her that Madame Merle's intention had not been good? Nothing but the mistrust which had lately taken body and which married itself now to the fruitful wonder produced by her visitor's challenge on behalf of poor Pansy. There was something in this challenge which had at the very outset excited an answering defiance; a nameless vitality which she could see to have been absent from her friend's professions of delicacy and caution. Madame Merle had been unwilling to interfere, certainly, but only so long as there was nothing to interfere with. It will perhaps seem to the reader that Isabel went fast in casting doubt, on mere suspicion, on a sincerity proved by several years of good offices. She moved quickly indeed, and with reason, for a strange truth was filtering into her soul. Madame Merle's interest was identical with Osmond's: that was enough. 'I think Pansy will tell you nothing that will make you more angry,' she said in answer to her companion's last remark.

'I'm not in the least angry. I've only a great desire to retrieve the situation. Do you consider that Warburton has left us for ever?'

'I can't tell you; I don't understand you. It's all over; please let it rest. Osmond has talked to me a great deal about it, and I've nothing more to say or to hear. I've no doubt,' Isabel added, 'that he'll be very happy to discuss the subject with you.'

‘I know what he thinks; he came to see me last evening.’

‘As soon as you had arrived? Then you know all about it and you needn’t apply to me for information.’

‘It isn’t information I want. At bottom it’s sympathy. I had set my heart on that marriage; the idea did what so few things do—it satisfied the imagination.’

‘Your imagination, yes. But not that of the persons concerned.’

‘You mean by that of course that I’m not concerned. Of course not directly. But when one’s such an old friend one can’t help having something at stake. You forget how long I’ve known Pansy. You mean, of course,’ Madame Merle added, ‘that *you* are one of the persons concerned.’

‘No; that’s the last thing I mean. I’m very weary of it all.’

Madame Merle hesitated a little. ‘Ah yes, your work’s done.’

‘Take care what you say,’ said Isabel very gravely.

‘Oh, I take care; never perhaps more than when it appears least. Your husband judges you severely.’

Isabel made for a moment no answer to this; she felt choked with bitterness. It was not the insolence of Madame Merle’s informing her that Osmond had been taking her into his confidence as against his wife that struck her most; for she was not quick to believe that this was meant for insolence. Madame Merle was very rarely insolent, and only when it was exactly right. It was not right now, or at least it was not right yet. What touched Isabel like a drop of corrosive acid upon an open wound was the knowledge that Osmond dishonoured her in his words as well as in his thoughts. ‘Should you like to know how I judge *him*?’ she asked at last.

‘No, because you’d never tell me. And it would be painful for me to know.’

There was a pause, and for the first time since she had known her Isabel thought Madame Merle disagreeable. She wished she would leave her. ‘Remember how attractive Pansy is, and don’t despair,’ she said abruptly, with a desire that this should close their interview.

But Madame Merle’s expansive presence underwent no contraction. She only gathered her mantle about her and, with the movement, scattered upon the air a faint, agreeable fragrance. ‘I don’t despair; I feel encouraged. And I didn’t come to scold you; I came if possible to learn the truth. I know you’ll tell it if I ask you. It’s an immense blessing with you that one can count upon that. No, you won’t believe what a comfort I take in it.’

‘What truth do you speak of?’ Isabel asked, wondering.

‘Just this: whether Lord Warburton changed his mind quite of his own movement or because you recommended it. To please himself I mean, or to please you. Think of the confidence I must still have in you, in spite of having lost a little of it,’ Madame Merle continued with a smile, ‘to ask such a question as that!’ She sat looking at her friend, to judge the effect of her words, and then went on: ‘Now don’t be heroic, don’t be unreasonable, don’t take offence. It seems to me I do you an honour in speaking so. I don’t know another woman to whom I would do it. I haven’t the least idea that any other woman would tell me the truth. And don’t you see how well it is that your husband should know it? It’s true that he doesn’t appear to have had any tact whatever in trying to extract it; he has indulged in gratuitous suppositions. But that doesn’t alter the fact that it would make a difference in his view of his daughter’s prospects to know distinctly what really occurred. If Lord Warburton simply got tired of the poor child, that’s one thing, and it’s a pity. If he gave her up to please you it’s another. That’s a pity too, but in a different way. Then, in the latter case, you’d perhaps resign yourself to not being pleased—to simply seeing your stepdaughter married. Let him off—let us have him!’

Madame Merle had proceeded very deliberately, watching her companion and apparently thinking she could proceed safely. As she went on Isabel grew pale; she clasped her hands more tightly in her lap. It was not that her visitor had at last thought it the right time to be insolent; for this was not what was most apparent. It was a worse horror than that. ‘Who are you—what are you?’ Isabel murmured. ‘What have you to do with my husband?’ It was strange that for the moment she drew as near to him as if she had loved him.

‘Ah then, you take it heroically! I’m very sorry. Don’t think, however, that I shall do so.’

‘What have you to do with me?’ Isabel went on.

Madame Merle slowly got up, stroking her muff, but not removing her eyes from Isabel’s face. ‘Everything!’ she answered.

Isabel sat there looking up at her, without rising; her face was almost a prayer to be enlightened. But the light of this woman’s eyes seemed only a darkness. ‘Oh misery!’ she murmured at last; and she fell

back, covering her face with her hands. It had come over her like a high-surging wave that Mrs Touchett was right. Madame Merle had married her. Before she uncovered her face again that lady had left the room.

Isabel took a drive alone that afternoon; she wished to be far away, under the sky, where she could descend from her carriage and tread upon the daisies. She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of the continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater. She had become deeply, tenderly acquainted with Rome; it interfused and moderated her passion. But she had grown to think of it chiefly as the place where people had suffered. This was what came to her in the starved churches, where the marble columns, transferred from pagan ruins, seemed to offer her a companionship in endurance and the musty incense to be a compound of long-unanswered prayers. There was no gentler nor less consistent heretic than Isabel; the firmest of worshippers, gazing at dark altar-pictures or clustered candles, could not have felt more intimately the suggestiveness of these objects nor have been more liable at such moments to a spiritual visitation. Pansy, as we know, was almost always her companion, and of late the Countess Gemini, balancing a pink parasol, had lent brilliancy to their equipage; but she still occasionally found herself alone when it suited her mood and where it suited the place. On such occasions she had several resorts; the most accessible of which perhaps was a seat on the low parapet which edges the wide grassy space before the high, cold front of Saint John Lateran, whence you look across the Campagna* at the far-trailing outline of the Alban Mount and at that mighty plain, between, which is still so full of all that has passed from it. After the departure of her cousin and his companions she roamed more than usual; she carried her sombre spirit from one familiar shrine to the other. Even when Pansy and the Countess were with her she felt the touch of a vanished world. The carriage, leaving the walls of Rome behind, rolled through narrow lanes where the wild honeysuckle had begun to tangle itself in the hedges, or waited for her in quiet places where the fields lay near, while she strolled further and further over the flower-freckled turf, or sat on a stone that had once had a use and gazed through the veil of her personal sadness at the splendid sadness of the scene—at the dense, warm light, the far gradations and soft confusions of colour, the motionless shepherds in lonely attitudes, the hills where the cloud-shadows had the lightness of a blush.

On the afternoon I began with speaking of, she had taken a resolution not to think of Madame Merle; but the resolution proved vain, and this lady's image hovered constantly before her. She asked herself, with an almost childlike horror of the supposition, whether to this intimate friend of several years the great historical epithet of *wicked* were to be applied. She knew the idea only by the Bible and other literary works; to the best of her belief she had had no personal acquaintance with wickedness. She had desired a large acquaintance with human life, and in spite of her having flattered herself that she cultivated it with some success this elementary privilege had been denied her. Perhaps it was not wicked —in the historic sense—to be even deeply false; for that was what Madame Merle had been—deeply, deeply, deeply. Isabel's Aunt Lydia had made this discovery long before, and had mentioned it to her niece; but Isabel had flattered herself at this time that she had a much richer view of things, especially of the spontaneity of her own career and the nobleness of her own interpretations, than poor stiffly-reasoning Mrs Touchett. Madame Merle had done what she wanted; she had brought about the union of her two friends; a reflection which could not fail to make it a matter of wonder that she should so much have desired such an event. There were people who had the match-making passion, like the votaries of art for art; but Madame Merle, great artist as she was, was scarcely one of these. She thought too ill of marriage, too ill even of life; she had desired that particular marriage but had not desired others. She had therefore had a conception of gain, and Isabel asked herself where she had found her profit. It took her naturally a long time to discover, and even then her discovery was imperfect. It came back to her that Madame Merle, though she had seemed to like her from their first meeting at Gardencourt, had been doubly affectionate after Mr Touchett's death and after learning that her young friend had been subject to the good old man's charity. She had found her profit not in the gross device of borrowing money, but in the more refined idea of introducing one of her intimates to the young woman's fresh and ingenuous fortune. She had naturally chosen her closest intimate, and it was already vivid enough to Isabel that Gilbert occupied this position. She found herself confronted in this manner with the conviction that the man in the world whom she had supposed to be the least sordid had married her, like a vulgar adventurer, for her money. Strange to say, it had never before occurred to her; if she had thought a good

deal of harm of Osmond she had not done him this particular injury. This was the worst she could think of, and she had been saying to herself that the worst was still to come. A man might marry a woman for her money perfectly well; the thing was often done. But at least he should let her know. She wondered whether, since he had wanted her money, her money would now satisfy him. Would he take her money and let her go? Ah, if Mr Touchett's great charity would but help her to-day it would be blessed indeed! It was not slow to occur to her that if Madame Merle had wished to do Gilbert a service his recognition to her of the boon must have lost its warmth. What must be his feelings to-day in regard to his too zealous benefactress, and what expression must they have found on the part of such a master of irony? It is a singular, but a characteristic, fact that before Isabel returned from her silent drive she had broken its silence by the soft exclamation: 'Poor, poor Madame Merle!'

Her compassion would perhaps have been justified if on this same afternoon she had been concealed behind one of the valuable curtains of time-softened damask which dressed the interesting little *salon* of the lady to whom it referred; the carefully-arranged apartment to which we once paid a visit in company with the discreet Mr Rosier. In that apartment, towards six o'clock, Gilbert Osmond was seated, and his hostess stood before him as Isabel had seen her stand on an occasion commemorated in this history with an emphasis appropriate not so much to its apparent as to its real importance.

'I don't believe you're unhappy; I believe you like it,' said Madame Merle.

'Did I say I was unhappy?' Osmond asked with a face grave enough to suggest that he might have been.

'No, but you don't say the contrary, as you ought in common gratitude.'

'Don't talk about gratitude,' he returned dryly. 'And don't aggravate me,' he added in a moment.

Madame Merle slowly seated herself, with her arms folded and her white hands arranged as a support to one of them and an ornament, as it were, to the other. She looked exquisitely calm but impressively sad. 'On your side, don't try to frighten me. I wonder if you guess some of my thoughts.'

'I trouble about them no more than I can help. I've quite enough of my own.'

'That's because they're so delightful.'

Osmond rested his head against the back of his chair and looked at his companion with a cynical directness which seemed also partly an expression of fatigue. 'You do aggravate me,' he remarked in a moment. 'I'm very tired.'

*'Eh moi donc!'** cried Madame Merle.

'With you it's because you fatigue yourself. With me it's not my own fault.'

'When I fatigue myself it's for you. I've given you an interest. That's a great gift.'

'Do you call it an interest?' Osmond enquired with detachment.

'Certainly, since it helps you to pass your time.'

'The time has never seemed longer to me than this winter.'

'You've never looked better; you've never been so agreeable, so brilliant.'

'Damn my brilliancy!' he thoughtfully murmured. 'How little, after all, you know me!'

'If I don't know you I know nothing,' smiled Madame Merle. 'You've the feeling of complete success.'

'No, I shall not have that till I've made you stop judging me.'

'I did that long ago. I speak from old knowledge. But you express yourself more too.'

Osmond just hung fire. 'I wish you'd express yourself less!'

'You wish to condemn me to silence? Remember that I've never been a chatterbox. At any rate there are three or four things I should like to say to you first. Your wife doesn't know what to do with herself,' she went on with a change of tone.

'Pardon me; she knows perfectly. She has a line sharply drawn. She means to carry out her ideas.'

'Her ideas to-day must be remarkable.'

'Certainly they are. She has more of them than ever.'

'She was unable to show me any this morning,' said Madame Merle. 'She seemed in a very simple, almost in a stupid, state of mind. She was completely bewildered.'

'You had better say at once that she was pathetic.'

'Ah no, I don't want to encourage you too much.'

He still had his head against the cushion behind him; the ankle of one foot rested on the other knee. So he sat for a while. 'I should like to know what's the matter with you,' he said at last.

‘The matter—the matter—!’ And here Madame Merle stopped. Then she went on with a sudden outbreak of passion, a burst of summer thunder in a clear sky: ‘The matter is that I would give my right hand to be able to weep, and that I can’t!’

‘What good would it do you to weep?’

‘It would make me feel as I felt before I knew you.’

‘If I’ve dried your tears, that’s something. But I’ve seen you shed them.’

‘Oh, I believe you’ll make me cry still. I mean make me howl like a wolf.* I’ve a great hope, I’ve a great need, of that. I was vile this morning; I was horrid,’ she said.

‘If Isabel was in the stupid state of mind you mention she probably didn’t perceive it,’ Osmond answered.

‘It was precisely my deviltry that stupefied her. I couldn’t help it; I was full of something bad. Perhaps it was something good; I don’t know. You’ve not only dried up my tears; you’ve dried up my soul.’

‘It’s not I then that am responsible for my wife’s condition,’ Osmond said. ‘It’s pleasant to think that I shall get the benefit of your influence upon her. Don’t you know the soul is an immortal principle? How can it suffer alteration?’

‘I don’t believe at all that it’s an immortal principle. I believe it can perfectly be destroyed. That’s what has happened to mine, which was a very good one to start with; and it’s you I have to thank for it. You’re *very* bad,’ she added with gravity in her emphasis.

‘Is this the way we’re to end?’ Osmond asked with the same studied coldness.

‘I don’t know how we’re to end. I wish I did! How do bad people end?—especially as to their *common* crimes. You have made me as bad as yourself.’

‘I don’t understand you. You seem to me quite good enough,’ said Osmond, his conscious indifference giving an extreme effect to the words.

Madame Merle’s self-possession tended on the contrary to diminish, and she was nearer losing it than on any occasion on which we have had the pleasure of meeting her. The glow of her eye turned sombre; her smile betrayed a painful effort. ‘Good enough for anything that I’ve done with myself? I suppose that’s what you mean.’

‘Good enough to be always charming!’ Osmond exclaimed, smiling too.

‘Oh God!’ his companion murmured; and, sitting there in her ripe freshness, she had recourse to the same gesture she had provoked on Isabel’s part in the morning: she bent her face and covered it with her hands.

‘Are you going to weep after all?’ Osmond asked; and on her remaining motionless he went on: ‘Have I ever complained to you?’

She dropped her hand quickly. ‘No, you’ve taken your revenge otherwise—you have taken it on *her*.’

Osmond threw back his head further; he looked a while at the ceiling and might have been supposed to be appealing, in an informal way, to the heavenly powers. ‘Oh, the imagination of women! It’s always vulgar, at bottom. You talk of revenge like a third-rate novelist.’

‘Of course you haven’t complained. You’ve enjoyed your triumph too much.’

‘I’m rather curious to know what you call my triumph.’

‘You’ve made your wife afraid of you.’

Osmond changed his position; he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and looking a while at a beautiful old Persian rug, at his feet. He had an air of refusing to accept any one’s valuation of anything, even of time, and of preferring to abide by his own; a peculiarity which made him at moments an irritating person to converse with. ‘Isabel’s not afraid of me, and it’s not what I wish,’ he said at last. ‘To what do you want to provoke me when you say such things as that?’

‘I’ve thought over all the harm you can do me,’ Madame Merle answered. ‘Your wife was afraid of me this morning, but in me it was really you she feared.’

‘You may have said things that were in very bad taste; I’m not responsible for that. I didn’t see the use of your going to see her at all: you’re capable of acting without her. I’ve not made *you* afraid of me that I can see,’ he went on; ‘how then should I have made her? You’re at least as brave. I can’t think where you’ve picked up such rubbish; one might suppose you knew me by this time.’ He got up as he spoke and walked to the chimney, where he stood a moment bending his eye, as if he had seen them for the first time, on the delicate specimens of rare porcelain with which it was covered. He took up a small cup and held it in his hand; then, still holding it and leaning his arm on the mantel, he pursued: ‘You always see

too much in everything; you overdo it; you lose sight of the real. I'm much simpler than you think.'

'I think you're very simple.' And Madame Merle kept her eye on her cup. 'I've come to that with time. I judged you, as I say, of old; but it's only since your marriage that I've understood you. I've seen better what you have been to your wife than I ever saw what you were for me. Please be very careful of that precious object.'*

'It already has a wee bit of a tiny crack,' said Osmond dryly as he put it down. 'If you didn't understand me before I married it was cruelly rash of you to put me into such a box. However, I took a fancy to my box myself; I thought it would be a comfortable fit. I asked very little; I only asked that she should like me.'

'That she should like you so much!'

'So much, of course; in such a case one asks the maximum. That she should adore me, if you will. Oh yes, I wanted that.'

'I never adored you,' said Madame Merle.

'Ah, but you pretended to!'

'It's true that you never accused me of being a comfortable fit,' Madame Merle went on.

'My wife has declined—declined to do anything of the sort,' said Osmond. 'If you're determined to make a tragedy of that, the tragedy's hardly for her.'

'The tragedy's for me!' Madame Merle exclaimed, rising with a long low sigh but having a glance at the same time for the contents of her mantel-shelf. 'It appears that I'm to be severely taught the disadvantages of a false position.'

'You express yourself like a sentence in a copy-book. We must look for our comfort where we can find it. If my wife doesn't like me, at least my child does. I shall look for compensations in Pansy. Fortunately I haven't a fault to find with her.'

'Ah,' she said softly, 'if I had a child—!'

Osmond waited, and then, with a little formal air, 'The children of others may be a great interest!' he announced.

'You're more like a copy-book than I. There's something after all that holds us together.'

'Is it the idea of the harm I may do you?' Osmond asked.

'No; it's the idea of the good I may do for you. It's that,' Madame Merle pursued, 'that made me so jealous of Isabel. I want it to be *my* work,' she added, with her face, which had grown hard and bitter, relaxing to its habit of smoothness.

Her friend took up his hat and his umbrella, and after giving the former article two or three strokes with his coat-cuff, 'On the whole, I think,' he said, 'you had better leave it to me.'

After he had left her she went, the first thing, and lifted from the mantel-shelf the attenuated coffee-cup in which he had mentioned the existence of a crack; but she looked at it rather abstractedly. 'Have I been so vile all for nothing?' she vaguely wailed.*

L

As the Countess Gemini was not acquainted with the ancient monuments Isabel occasionally offered to introduce her to these interesting relics and to give their afternoon drive an antiquarian aim. The Countess, who professed to think her sister-in–law a prodigy of learning, never made an objection, and gazed at masses of Roman brickwork as patiently as if they had been mounds of modern drapery. She had not the historic sense, though she had in some directions the anecdotic, and as regards herself the apologetic, but she was so delighted to be in Rome that she only desired to float with the current. She would gladly have passed an hour every day in the damp darkness of the Baths of Titus* if it had been a condition of her remaining at Palazzo Roccanera. Isabel, however, was not a severe cicerone; she used to visit the ruins chiefly because they offered an excuse for talking about other matters than the love-affairs of the ladies of Florence, as to which her companion was never weary of offering information. It must be added that during these visits the Countess forbade herself every form of active research; her preference was to sit in the carriage and exclaim that everything was most interesting. It was in this manner that she had hitherto examined the Coliseum, to the infinite regret of her niece, who—with all the respect that she owed her—could not see why she should not descend from the vehicle and enter the building. Pansy had so little chance to ramble that her view of the case was not wholly disinterested; it may be divined that she had a secret hope that, once inside, her parents' guest might be induced to climb to the upper tiers. There came a day when the Countess announced her willingness to undertake this feat—a mild afternoon in March when the windy month expressed itself in occasional puffs of spring. The three ladies went into the Coliseum together, but Isabel left her companions to wander over the place. She had often ascended to those desolate ledges from which the Roman crowd used to bellow applause and where now the wild flowers (when they are allowed) bloom in the deep crevices; and to-day she felt weary and disposed to sit in the despoiled arena. It made an intermission too, for the Countess often asked more from one's attention than she gave in return; and Isabel believed that when she was alone with her niece she let the dust gather for a moment on the ancient scandals of the Arnide.* She so remained below therefore, while Pansy guided her undiscriminating aunt to the steep brick staircase at the foot of which the custodian unlocks the tall wooden gate. The great enclosure was half in shadow; the western sun brought out the pale red tone of the great blocks of travertine—the latent colour that is the only living element in the immense ruin. Here and there wandered a peasant or a tourist, looking up at the far skyline where, in the clear stillness, a multitude of swallows kept circling and plunging. Isabel presently became aware that one of the other visitors, planted in the middle of the arena, had turned his attention to her own person and was looking at her with a certain little poise of the head which she had some weeks before perceived to be characteristic of baffled but indestructible purpose. Such an attitude, today, could belong only to Mr Edward Rosier; and this gentleman proved in fact to have been considering the question of speaking to her. When he had assured himself that she was unaccompanied he drew near, remarking that though she would not answer his letters she would perhaps not wholly close her ears to his spoken eloquence. She replied that her stepdaughter was close at hand and that she could only give him five minutes; whereupon he took out his watch and sat down upon a broken block.

'It's very soon told,' said Edward Rosier. 'I've sold all my bibelots!' Isabel gave instinctively an exclamation of horror; it was as if he had told her he had had all his teeth drawn. 'I've sold them by auction at the Hôtel Drouot,' he went on. 'The sale took place three days ago, and they've telegraphed me the result. It's magnificent.'

'I'm glad to hear it; but I wish you had kept your pretty things.'

'I have the money instead—fifty thousand dollars. Will Mr Osmond think me rich enough now?'

'Is it for that you did it?' Isabel asked gently.

'For what else in the world could it be? That's the only thing I think of. I went to Paris and made my arrangements. I couldn't stop for the sale; I couldn't have seen them going off; I think it would have killed me. But I put them into good hands, and they brought high prices. I should tell you I have kept my enamels. Now I have the money in my pocket, and he can't say I'm poor!' the young man exclaimed defiantly.

'He'll say now that you're not wise,' said Isabel, as if Gilbert Osmond had never said this before.

Rosier gave her a sharp look. 'Do you mean that without my bibelots I'm nothing? Do you mean they

were the best thing about me? That's what they told me in Paris; oh they were very frank about it. But they hadn't seen *her*!'

'My dear friend, you deserve to succeed,' said Isabel very kindly.

'You say that so sadly that it's the same as if you said I shouldn't.' And he questioned her eyes with the clear trepidation of his own. He had the air of a man who knows he has been the talk of Paris for a week and is full half a head taller in consequence, but who also has a painful suspicion that in spite of this increase of stature one or two persons still have the perversity to think him diminutive. 'I know what happened here while I was away,' he went on. 'What does Mr Osmond expect after she has refused Lord Warburton?'

Isabel debated. 'That she'll marry another nobleman.'

'What other nobleman?'

'One that he'll pick out.'

Rosier slowly got up, putting his watch into his waistcoat-pocket. 'You're laughing at some one, but this time I don't think it's at me.'

'I didn't mean to laugh,' said Isabel. 'I laugh very seldom. Now you had better go away.'

'I feel very safe!' Rosier declared without moving. This might be; but it evidently made him feel more so to make the announcement in rather a loud voice, balancing himself a little complacently on his toes and looking all round the Coliseum as if it were filled with an audience. Suddenly Isabel saw him change colour; there was more of an audience than he had suspected. She turned and perceived that her two companions had returned from their excursion. 'You must really go away,' she said quickly.

'Ah, my dear lady, pity me!' Edward Rosier murmured in a voice strangely at variance with the announcement I have just quoted. And then he added eagerly, like a man who in the midst of his misery is seized by a happy thought: 'Is that lady the Countess Gemini? I've a great desire to be presented to her.'

Isabel looked at him a moment. 'She has no influence with her brother.'

'Ah, what a monster you make him out!' And Rosier faced the Countess, who advanced, in front of Pansy, with an animation partly due perhaps to the fact that she perceived her sister-in–law to be engaged in conversation with a very pretty young man.

'I'm glad you've kept your enamels!' Isabel called as she left him. She went straight to Pansy, who, on seeing Edward Rosier, had stopped short, with lowered eyes. 'We'll go back to the carriage,' she said gently.

'Yes, it's getting late,' Pansy returned more gently still. And she went on without a murmur, without faltering or glancing back.

Isabel, however, allowing herself this last liberty, saw that a meeting had immediately taken place between the Countess and Mr Rosier. He had removed his hat and was bowing and smiling; he had evidently introduced himself, while the Countess's expressive back displayed to Isabel's eye a gracious inclination. These facts, none the less, were presently lost to sight, for Isabel and Pansy took their places again in the carriage. Pansy, who faced her stepmother, at first kept her eyes fixed on her lap; then she raised them and rested them on Isabel's. There shone out of each of them a little melancholy ray—a spark of timid passion which touched Isabel to the heart. At the same time a wave of envy passed over her soul, as she compared the tremulous longing, the definite ideal of the child with her own dry despair. 'Poor little Pansy!' she affectionately said.

'Oh never mind!' Pansy answered in the tone of eager apology.

And then there was a silence; the Countess was a long time coming. 'Did you show your aunt everything, and did she enjoy it?' Isabel asked at last.

'Yes, I showed her everything. I think she was very much pleased.'

'And you're not tired, I hope.'

'Oh no, thank you, I'm not tired.'

The Countess still remained behind, so that Isabel requested the footman to go into the Coliseum and tell her they were waiting. He presently returned with the announcement that the Signora Contessa begged them not to wait—she would come home in a cab!'

About a week after this lady's quick sympathies had enlisted themselves with Mr Rosier, Isabel, going rather late to dress for dinner, found Pansy sitting in her room. The girl seemed to have been awaiting her; she got up from her low chair. 'Pardon my taking the liberty,' she said in a small voice. 'It will be the last—for some time.'

Her voice was strange, and her eyes, widely opened, had an excited, frightened look. 'You're not going

away!' Isabel exclaimed.

'I'm going to the convent.'

'To the convent?'

Pansy drew nearer, till she was near enough to put her arms round Isabel and rest her head on her shoulder. She stood this way a moment, perfectly still; but her companion could feel her tremble. The quiver of her little body expressed everything she was unable to say. Isabel nevertheless pressed her. 'Why are you going to the convent?'

'Because papa thinks it best. He says a young girl's better, every now and then, for making a little retreat. He says the world, always the world, is very bad for a young girl. This is just a chance for a little seclusion—a little reflexion.' Pansy spoke in short detached sentences, as if she could scarce trust herself; and then she added with a triumph of self-control: 'I think papa's right; I've been so much in the world this winter.'

Her announcement had a strange effect on Isabel; it seemed to carry a larger meaning than the girl herself knew. 'When was this decided?' she asked. 'I've heard nothing of it.'

'Papa told me half an hour ago; he thought it better it shouldn't be too much talked about in advance. Madame Catherine's to come for me at a quarter past seven, and I'm only to take two frocks. It's only for a few weeks; I'm sure it will be very good. I shall find all those ladies who used to be so kind to me, and I shall see the little girls who are being educated. I'm very fond of little girls,' said Pansy with an effect of diminutive grandeur. 'And I'm also very fond of Mother Catherine. I shall be very quiet and think a great deal.'

Isabel listened to her, holding her breath; she was almost awestruck. 'Think of *me* sometimes.'

'Ah, come and see me soon!' cried Pansy; and the cry was very different from the heroic remarks of which she had just delivered herself.

Isabel could say nothing more; she understood nothing; she only felt how little she yet knew her husband. Her answer to his daughter was a long, tender kiss.

Half an hour later she learned from her maid that Madame Catherine had arrived in a cab and had departed again with the signorina. On going to the drawing-room before dinner she found the Countess Gemini alone, and this lady characterised the incident by exclaiming, with a wonderful toss of the head, '*En voilà, ma chère, une pose!*'* But if it was an affectation she was at a loss to see what her husband affected. She could only dimly perceive that he had more traditions than she supposed. It had become her habit to be so careful as to what she said to him that, strange as it may appear, she hesitated, for several minutes after he had come in, to allude to his daughter's sudden departure: she spoke of it only after they were seated at table. But she had forbidden herself ever to ask Osmond a question. All she could do was to make a declaration, and there was one that came very naturally. 'I shall miss Pansy very much.'

He looked a while, with his head inclined a little, at the basket of flowers in the middle of the table. 'Ah yes,' he said at last, 'I had thought of that. You must go and see her, you know; but not too often. I dare say you wonder why I sent her to the good sisters; but I doubt if I can make you understand. It doesn't matter; don't trouble yourself about it. That's why I had not spoken of it. I didn't believe you would enter into it. But I've always had the idea; I've always thought it a part of the education of one's daughter. One's daughter should be fresh and fair; she should be innocent and gentle. With the manners of the present time she is liable to become so dusty and crumpled. Pansy's a little dusty, a little dishevelled; she has knocked about too much. This bustling, pushing rabble that calls itself society—one should take her out of it occasionally. Convents are very quiet, very convenient, very salutary. I like to think of her there, in the old garden, under the arcade, among those tranquil virtuous women. Many of them are gentlewomen born; several of them are noble. She will have her books and her drawing, she will have her piano. I've made the most liberal arrangements. There is to be nothing ascetic; there's just to be a certain little sense of sequestration. She'll have time to think, and there's something I want her to think about.' Osmond spoke deliberately, reasonably, still with his head on one side, as if he were looking at the basket of flowers. His tone, however, was that of a man not so much offering an explanation as putting a thing into words—almost into pictures—to see, himself, how it would look. He considered a while the picture he had evoked and seemed greatly pleased with it. And then he went on: 'The Catholics are very wise after all. The convent is a great institution; we can't do without it; it corresponds to an essential need in families, in society. It's a school of good manners; it's a school of repose. Oh, I don't want to detach my daughter from the world,' he added; 'I don't want to make her fix her thoughts on any other. This one's very well, as *she* should take it, and she may think of it as much as she likes. Only she must think of it in the right way.'

Isabel gave an extreme attention to this little sketch; she found it indeed intensely interesting. It seemed to show her how far her husband's desire to be effective was capable of going—to the point of playing theoretic tricks on the delicate organism of his daughter. She could not understand his purpose, no—not wholly; but she understood it better than he supposed or desired, inasmuch as she was convinced that the whole proceeding was an elaborate mystification, addressed to herself and destined to act upon her imagination. He had wanted to do something sudden and arbitrary, something unexpected and refined; to mark the difference between his sympathies and her own, and show that if he regarded his daughter as a precious work of art it was natural he should be more and more careful about the finishing touches. If he wished to be effective he had succeeded; the incident struck a chill into Isabel's heart. Pansy had known the convent in her childhood and had found a happy home there; she was fond of the good sisters, who were very fond of her, and there was therefore for the moment no definite hardship in her lot. But all the same the girl had taken fright; the impression her father desired to make would evidently be sharp enough. The old Protestant tradition had never faded from Isabel's imagination, and as her thoughts attached themselves to this striking example of her husband's genius—she sat looking, like him, at the basket of flowers—poor little Pansy became the heroine of a tragedy. Osmond wished it to be known that he shrank from nothing, and his wife found it hard to pretend to eat her dinner. There was a certain relief presently, in hearing the high, strained voice of her sister-in–law. The Countess too, apparently, had been thinking the thing out, but had arrived at a different conclusion from Isabel.

'It's very absurd, my dear Osmond,' she said, 'to invent so many pretty reasons for poor Pansy's banishment. Why don't you say at once that you want to get her out of my way? Haven't you discovered that I think very well of Mr Rosier? I do indeed; he seems to me *simpaticissimo*.* He has made me believe in true love; I never did before! Of course you've made up your mind that with those convictions I'm dreadful company for Pansy.'

Osmond took a sip of a glass of wine; he looked perfectly good humoured. 'My dear Amy,' he answered, smiling as if he were uttering a piece of gallantry, 'I don't know anything about your convictions, but if I suspected that they interfere with mine it would be much simpler to banish *you*.'

LI

THE Countess was not banished, but she felt the insecurity of her tenure of her brother's hospitality. A week after this incident Isabel received a telegram from England, dated from Gardencourt and bearing the stamp of Mrs Touchett's authorship. 'Ralph cannot last many days,' it ran, 'and if convenient would like to see you. Wishes me to say that you must come only if you've not other duties. Say, for myself, that you used to talk a good deal about your duty and to wonder what it was; shall be curious to see whether you've found it out. Ralph is really dying, and there's no other company.' Isabel was prepared for this news, having received from Henrietta Stackpole a detailed account of her journey to England with her appreciative patient. Ralph had arrived more dead than alive, but she had managed to convey him to Gardencourt, where he had taken to his bed, which, as Miss Stackpole wrote, he evidently would never leave again. She added that she had really had two patients on her hands instead of one, inasmuch as Mr Goodwood, who had been of no earthly use, was quite as ailing, in a different way, as Mr Touchett. Afterwards she wrote that she had been obliged to surrender the field to Mrs Touchett, who had just returned from America and had promptly given her to understand that she didn't wish any interviewing at Gardencourt. Isabel had written to her aunt shortly after Ralph came to Rome, letting her know of his critical condition and suggesting that she should lose no time in returning to Europe. Mrs Touchett had telegraphed an acknowledgement of this admonition, and the only further news Isabel received from her was the second telegram I have just quoted.

Isabel stood a moment looking at the latter missive; then, thrusting it into her pocket, she went straight to the door of her husband's study. Here she again paused an instant, after which she opened the door and went in. Osmond was seated at the table near the window with a folio volume before him, propped against a pile of books. This volume was open at a page of small coloured plates, and Isabel presently saw that he had been copying from it the drawing of an antique coin. A box of water-colours and fine brushes lay before him, and he had already transferred to a sheet of immaculate paper the delicate, finely-tinted disk. His back was turned toward the door, but he recognised his wife without looking round.

'Excuse me for disturbing you,' she said.

'When I come to your room I always knock,' he answered, going on with his work.

'I forgot; I had something else to think of. My cousin's dying.'

'Ah, I don't believe that,' said Osmond, looking at his drawing through a magnifying glass. 'He was dying when we married; he'll outlive us all.'

Isabel gave herself no time, no thought, to appreciate the careful cynicism of this declaration; she simply went on quickly, full of her own intention: 'My aunt has telegraphed for me; I must go to Gardencourt.'

'Why must you go to Gardencourt?' Osmond asked in the tone of impartial curiosity.

'To see Ralph before he dies.'

To this, for some time, he made no rejoinder; he continued to give his chief attention to his work, which was of a sort that would brook no negligence. 'I don't see the need of it,' he said at last. 'He came to see you here. I didn't like that; I thought his being in Rome a great mistake. But I tolerated it because it was to be the last time you should see him. Now you tell me it's not to have been the last. Ah, you're not grateful!'

'What am I to be grateful for?'

Gilbert Osmond laid down his little implements, blew a speck of dust from his drawing, slowly got up, and for the first time looked at his wife. 'For my not having interfered while he was here.'

'Oh yes, I am. I remember perfectly how distinctly you let me know you didn't like it. I was very glad when he went away.'

'Leave him alone then. Don't run after him.'

Isabel turned her eyes away from him; they rested upon his little drawing. 'I must go to England,' she said, with a full consciousness that her tone might strike an irritable man of taste as stupidly obstinate.

'I shall not like it if you do,' Osmond remarked.

'Why should I mind that? You won't like it if I don't. You like nothing I do or don't do. You pretend to

think I lie.'

Osmond turned slightly pale; he gave a cold smile. 'That's why you must go then? Not to see your cousin, but to take a revenge on me.'

'I know nothing about revenge.'

'I do,' said Osmond. 'Don't give me an occasion.'

'You're only too eager to take one. You wish immensely that I would commit some folly.'

'I should be gratified in that case if you disobeyed me.'

'If I disobeyed you?' said Isabel in a low tone which had the effect of mildness.

'Let it be clear. If you leave Rome to-day it will be a piece of the most deliberate, the most calculated, opposition.'

'How can you call it calculated? I received my aunt's telegram but three minutes ago.'

'You calculate rapidly; it's a great accomplishment. I don't see why we should prolong our discussion; you know my wish.' And he stood there as if he expected to see her withdraw.

But she never moved; she couldn't move, strange as it may seem; she still wished to justify herself; he had the power, in an extraordinary degree, of making her feel this need. There was something in her imagination he could always appeal to against her judgement. 'You've no reason for such a wish,' said Isabel, 'and I've every reason for going. I can't tell you how unjust you seem to me. But I think you know. It's your own opposition that's calculated. It's malignant.'

She had never uttered her worst thought to her husband before, and the sensation of hearing it was evidently new to Osmond. But he showed no surprise, and his coolness was apparently a proof that he had believed his wife would in fact be unable to resist for ever his ingenious endeavour to draw her out. 'It's all the more intense then,' he answered. And he added almost as if he were giving her a friendly counsel: 'This is a very important matter.' She recognised that; she was fully conscious of the weight of the occasion; she knew that between them they had arrived at a crisis. Its gravity made her careful; she said nothing, and he went on. 'You say I've no reason? I have the very best. I dislike, from the bottom of my soul, what you intend to do. It's dishonourable; it's indelicate; it's indecent. Your cousin is nothing whatever to me, and I'm under no obligation to make concessions to him. I've already made the very handsomest. Your relations with him, while he was here, kept me on pins and needles; but I let that pass, because from week to week I expected him to go. I've never liked him and he has never liked me. That's why you like him—because he hates me,' said Osmond with a quick, barely audible tremor in his voice. 'I've an ideal of what my wife should do and should not do. She should not travel across Europe alone, in defiance of my deepest desire, to sit at the bedside of other men. Your cousin's nothing to you; he's nothing to us. You smile most expressively when I talk about *us*, but I assure you that *we*, Mrs Osmond, is all I know. I take our marriage seriously; you appear to have found a way of not doing so. I'm not aware that we're divorced or separated; for me we're indissolubly united. You are nearer to me than any human creature, and I'm nearer to you. It may be a disagreeable proximity; it's one, at any rate, of our own deliberate making. You don't like to be reminded of that, I know; but I'm perfectly willing, because—because—' And he paused a moment, looking as if he had something to say which would be very much to the point. 'Because I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing!'

He spoke gravely and almost gently; the accent of sarcasm had dropped out of his tone. It had a gravity which checked his wife's quick emotion; the resolution with which she had entered the room found itself caught in a mesh of fine threads. His last words were not a command, they constituted a kind of appeal; and, though she felt that any expression of respect on his part could only be a refinement of egotism, they represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one's country. He spoke in the name of something sacred and precious—the observance of a magnificent form. They were as perfectly apart in feeling as two disillusioned lovers had ever been; but they had never yet separated in act. Isabel had not changed; her old passion for justice still abode within her; and now, in the very thick of her sense of her husband's blasphemous sophistry, it began to throb to a tune which for a moment promised him the victory. It came over her that in his wish to preserve appearances he was after all sincere, and that this, as far as it went, was a merit. Ten minutes before she had felt all the joy of irreflective action—a joy to which she had so long been a stranger; but action had been suddenly changed to slow renunciation, transformed by the blight of Osmond's touch. If she must renounce, however, she would let him know she was a victim rather than a dupe. 'I know you're a master of the art of mockery,' she said. 'How can you speak of an indissoluble union—how can you speak of your being contented? Where's our union when you accuse me of falsity? Where's your contentment when you

have nothing but hideous suspicion in your heart?'

'It is in our living decently together, in spite of such drawbacks.'

'We don't live decently together!' cried Isabel.

'Indeed we don't if you go to England.'

'That's very little; that's nothing. I might do much more.'

He raised his eyebrows and even his shoulders a little: he had lived long enough in Italy to catch this trick. 'Ah, if you've come to threaten me I prefer my drawing.' And he walked back to his table, where he took up the sheet of paper on which he had been working and stood studying it.

'I suppose that if I go you'll not expect me to come back,' said Isabel.

He turned quickly around, and she could see this movement at least was not designed. He looked at her a little, and then, 'Are you out of your mind?' he enquired.

'How can it be anything but a rupture?' she went on; 'especially if all you say is true?' She was unable to see how it could be anything but a rupture; she sincerely wished to know what else it might be.

He sat down before his table. 'I really can't argue with you on the hypothesis of your defying me,' he said. And he took up one of his little brushes again.

She lingered but a moment longer; long enough to embrace with her eye his whole deliberately indifferent yet most expressive figure; after which she quickly left the room. Her faculties, her energy, her passion, were all dispersed again; she felt as if a cold, dark mist had suddenly encompassed her. Osmond possessed in a supreme degree the art of eliciting any weakness. On her way back to her room she found the Countess Gemini standing in the open doorway of a little parlour in which a small collection of heterogeneous books had been arranged. The Countess had an open volume in her hand; she appeared to have been glancing down a page which failed to strike her as interesting. At the sound of Isabel's step she raised her head.

'Ah my dear,' she said, 'you, who are so literary, do tell me some amusing book to read! Everything here's of a dreariness—! Do you think this would do me any good?'

Isabel glanced at the title of the volume she held out, but without reading or understanding it. 'I'm afraid I can't advise you. I've had bad news. My cousin, Ralph Touchett, is dying.'

The Countess threw down her book. 'Ah, he was so simpatico.* I'm awfully sorry for you.'

'You would be sorrier still if you knew.'

'What is there to know? You look very badly,' the Countess added. 'You must have been with Osmond.'

Half an hour before Isabel would have listened very coldly to an intimation that she should ever feel a desire for the sympathy of her sister-in–law, and there can be no better proof of her present embarrassment than the fact that she almost clutched at this lady's fluttering attention. 'I've been with Osmond,' she said, while the Countess's bright eyes glittered at her.

'I'm sure then he has been odious!' the Countess cried. 'Did he say he was glad poor Mr Touchett's dying?'

'He said it's impossible I should go to England.'

The Countess's mind, when her interests were concerned, was agile; she already foresaw the extinction of any further brightness in her visit to Rome. Ralph Touchett would die, Isabel would go into mourning, and then there would be no more dinner-parties. Such a prospect produced for a moment in her countenance an expressive grimace; but this rapid, picturesque play of feature was her only tribute to disappointment. After all, she reflected, the game was almost played out; she had already overstayed her invitation. And then she cared enough for Isabel's trouble to forget her own, and she saw that Isabel's trouble was deep. It seemed deeper than the mere death of a cousin, and the Countess had no hesitation in connecting her exasperating brother with the expression of her sister-in–law's eyes. Her heart beat with an almost joyous expectation, for if she had wished to see Osmond overtopped the conditions looked favourable now. Of course if Isabel should go to England she herself would immediately leave Palazzo Roccanera; nothing would induce her to remain there with Osmond. Nevertheless she felt an immense desire to hear that Isabel would go to England. 'Nothing's impossible for you, my dear,' she said caressingly. 'Why else are you rich and clever and good?'

'Why indeed? I feel stupidly weak.'

'Why does Osmond say it's impossible?' the Countess asked in a tone which sufficiently declared that she couldn't imagine.

From the moment she thus began to question her, however, Isabel drew back; she disengaged her

hand, which the Countess had affectionately taken. But she answered this enquiry with frank bitterness. ‘Because we’re so happy together that we can’t separate even for a fortnight.’

‘Ah,’ cried the Countess while Isabel turned away, ‘when I want to make a journey my husband simply tells me I can have no money!’

Isabel went to her room, where she walked up and down for an hour. It may appear to some readers that she gave herself much trouble, and it is certain that for a woman of a high spirit she had allowed herself easily to be arrested. It seemed to her that only now she fully measured the great undertaking of matrimony. Marriage meant that in such a case as this, when one had to choose, one chose as a matter of course for one’s husband. ‘I’m afraid—yes, I’m afraid,’ she said to herself more than once, stopping short in her walk. But what she was afraid of was not her husband—his displeasure, his hatred, his revenge; it was not even her own later judgement of her conduct—a consideration which had often held her in check; it was simply the violence there would be in going when Osmond wished her to remain. A gulf of difference had opened between them, but nevertheless it was his desire that she should stay, it was a horror to him that she should go. She knew the nervous fineness with which he could feel an objection. What he thought of her she knew, what he was capable of saying to her she had felt; yet they were married, for all that, and marriage meant that a woman should cleave to the man with whom, uttering tremendous vows, she had stood at the altar.* She sank down on her sofa at last and buried her head in a pile of cushions.

When she raised her head again the Countess Gemini hovered before her. She had come in all unperceived; she had a strange smile on her thin lips and her whole face had grown in an hour a shining intimation. She lived assuredly, it might be said, at the window of her spirit, but now she was leaning far out. ‘I knocked,’ she began, ‘but you didn’t answer me. So I ventured in. I’ve been looking at you for the last five minutes. You’re very unhappy.’

‘Yes; but I don’t think you can comfort me.’

‘Will you give me leave to try?’ And the Countess sat down on the sofa beside her. She continued to smile, and there was something communicative and exultant in her expression. She appeared to have a deal to say, and it occurred to Isabel for the first time that her sister-in–law might say something really human. She made play with her glittering eyes, in which there was an unpleasant fascination. ‘After all,’ she soon resumed, ‘I must tell you, to begin with, that I don’t understand your state of mind. You seem to have so many scruples, so many reasons, so many ties. When I discovered, ten years ago, that my husband’s dearest wish was to make me miserable—of late he has simply let me alone—ah, it was a wonderful simplification! My poor Isabel, you’re not simple enough.’

‘No, I’m not simple enough,’ said Isabel.

‘There’s something I want you to know,’ the Countess declared—‘because I think you ought to know it. Perhaps you do; perhaps you’ve guessed it. But if you have, all I can say is that I understand still less why you shouldn’t do as you like.’

‘What do you wish me to know?’ Isabel felt a foreboding that made her heart beat faster. The Countess was about to justify herself, and this alone was portentous.

But she was nevertheless disposed to play a little with her subject. ‘In your place I should have guessed it ages ago. Have you never really suspected?’

‘I’ve guessed nothing. What should I have suspected? I don’t know what you mean.’

‘That’s because you’ve such a beastly pure mind. I never saw a woman with such a pure mind!’ cried the Countess.

Isabel slowly got up. ‘You’re going to tell me something horrible.’

‘You can call it by whatever name you will!’ And the Countess rose also, while her gathered perversity grew vivid and dreadful. She stood a moment in a sort of glare of intention and, as seemed to Isabel even then, of ugliness; after which she said: ‘My first sister-in-law had no children.’

Isabel stared back at her; the announcement was an anticlimax. ‘Your first sister-in–law?’

‘I suppose you know at least, if one may mention it, that Osmond has been married before! I’ve never spoken to you of his wife; I thought it mightn’t be decent or respectful. But others, less particular, must have done so. The poor little woman lived hardly three years and died childless. It wasn’t till after her death that Pansy arrived.’

Isabel’s brow had contracted to a frown; her lips were parted in pale, vague wonder. She was trying to follow; there seemed so much more to follow than she could see. ‘Pansy’s not my husband’s child then?’

‘Your husband’s—in perfection! But no one else’s husband’s. Some one else’s wife’s. Ah, my good

Isabel,' cried the Countess, 'with you one must dot one's i's!'

'I don't understand. Whose wife's?' Isabel asked.

'The wife of a horrid little Swiss who died—how long?—a dozen, more than fifteen, years ago. He never recognised Miss Pansy, nor, knowing what he was about, would have anything to say to her; and there was no reason why he should. Osmond did, and that was better;* though he had to fit on afterwards the whole rigmarole of his own wife's having died in childbirth, and of his having, in grief and horror, banished the little girl from his sight for as long as possible before taking her home from nurse. His wife had really died, you know, of quite another matter and in quite another place: in the Piedmontese mountains, where they had gone, one August, because her health appeared to require the air, but where she was suddenly taken worse—fatally ill. The story passed, sufficiently; it was covered by the appearances so long as nobody heeded, as nobody cared to look into it. But of course *I* knew—without researches,' the Countess lucidly proceeded; 'as also, you'll understand, without a word said between us—I mean between Osmond and me. Don't you see him looking at me, in silence, that way, to settle it?—that is to settle *me* if I should say anything. I said nothing, right or left—never a word to a creature, if you can believe that of me: on my honour, my dear, I speak of the thing to you now, after all this time, as I've never, never spoken. It was to be enough for me, from the first, that the child was my niece—from the moment she was my brother's daughter. As for her veritable mother—!' But with this Pansy's wonderful aunt dropped—as, involuntarily, from the impression of her sister-in-law's face, out of which more eyes might have seemed to look at her than she had ever had to meet.

She had spoken no name, yet Isabel could but check, on her own lips, an echo of the unspoken. She sank to her seat again, hanging her head. 'Why have you told me this?' she asked in a voice the Countess hardly recognised.

'Because I've been so bored with your not knowing. I've been bored, frankly, my dear, with not having told you; as if, stupidly, all this time I couldn't have managed! *Ça me dépasse*,* if you don't mind my saying so, the things, all round you, that you've appeared to succeed in not knowing. It's a sort of assistance—aid to innocent ignorance—that I've always been a bad hand at rendering; and in this connexion, that of keeping quiet for my brother, my virtue has at any rate finally found itself exhausted. It's not a black lie, moreover, you know,' the Countess inimitably added. 'The facts are exactly what I tell you.'

'I had no idea,' said Isabel presently; and looked up at her in a manner that doubtless matched the apparent witlessness of this confession.

'So I believed—though it was hard to believe. Had it never occurred to you that he was for six or seven years her lover?'

'I don't know. Things *have* occurred to me, and perhaps that was what they all meant.'

'She has been wonderfully clever, she has been magnificent, about Pansy!' the Countess, before all this view of it, cried.

'Oh, no idea, for me,' Isabel went on, 'ever *definitely* took that form.' She appeared to be making out to herself what had been and what hadn't. 'And as it is—I don't understand.'

She spoke as one troubled and puzzled, yet the poor Countess seemed to have seen her revelation fall below its possibilities of effect. She had expected to kindle some responsive blaze, but had barely extracted a spark. Isabel showed as scarce more impressed than she might have been, as a young woman of approved imagination, with some fine sinister passage of public history. 'Don't you recognise how the child could never pass for *her* husband's?—that is with M. Merle himself,' her companion resumed. 'They had been separated too long for that, and he had gone to some far country—I think to South America. If she had ever had children—which I'm not sure of—she had lost them. The conditions happened to make it workable, under stress (I mean at so awkward a pinch), that Osmond should acknowledge the little girl. His wife was dead—very true; but she had not been dead too long to put a certain accommodation of dates out of the question—from the moment, I mean, that suspicion wasn't started; which was what they had to take care of. What was more natural than that poor Mrs Osmond, at a distance and for a world not troubling about trifles, should have left behind her, *poverina*,* the pledge of her brief happiness that had cost her her life?

With the aid of a change of residence—Osmond had been living with her at Naples at the time of their stay in the Alps, and he in due course left it for ever—the whole history was successfully set going. My poor sister-in–law, in her grave, couldn't help herself, and the real mother, to save *her* skin, renounced all visible property in the child.'

'Ah, poor, poor woman!' cried Isabel, who herewith burst into tears. It was a long time since she had

shed any; she had suffered a high reaction from weeping. But now they flowed with an abundance in which the Countess Gemini found only another discomfiture.

'It's very kind of you to pity her!' she discordantly laughed. 'Yes indeed, you have a way of your own —!'

'He must have been false to his wife—and so very soon!' said Isabel with a sudden check.

'That's all that's wanting—that you should take up *her* cause!' the Countess went on. 'I quite agree with you, however, that it was much too soon.'

'But to me, to me—?' And Isabel hesitated as if she had not heard; as if her question—though it was sufficiently there in her eyes—were all for herself.

'To you he has been faithful? Well, it depends, my dear, on what you call faithful. When he married you he was no longer the lover of another woman—*such* a lover as he had been, *cara mia*,* between their risks and their precautions, while the thing lasted! That state of affairs had passed away; the lady had repented, or at all events, for reasons of her own, drawn back: she had always had, too, a worship of appearances so intense that even Osmond himself had got bored with it. You may therefore imagine what it was—when he couldn't patch it on conveniently to *any* of those he goes in for! But the whole past was between them.'

'Yes,' Isabel mechanically echoed, 'the whole past is between them.'

'Ah, this later past is nothing. But for six or seven years, as I say, they had kept it up.'

She was silent a little. 'Why then did she want him to marry me?'

'Ah my dear, that's her superiority! Because you had money; and because she believed you would be good to Pansy.'

'Poor woman—and Pansy who doesn't like her!' cried Isabel.

'That's the reason she wanted some one whom Pansy would like. She knows it, she knows everything.'

'Will she know that you've told me this?'

'That will depend upon whether you tell her. She's prepared for it, and do you know what she counts upon for her defence? On your believing that I lie. Perhaps you do; don't make yourself uncomfortable to hide it. Only, as it happens this time, I don't. I've told plenty of little idiotic fibs, but they've never hurt any one but myself.'

Isabel sat staring at her companion's story as at a bale of fantastic wares some strolling gypsy might have unpacked on the carpet at her feet. 'Why did Osmond never marry her?' she finally asked.

'Because she had no money.' The Countess had an answer for everything, and if she lied she lied well. 'No one knows, no one has ever known, what she lives on, or how she has got all those beautiful things. I don't believe Osmond himself knows. Besides, she wouldn't have married him.'

'How can she have loved him then?'

'She doesn't love him in that way. She did at first, and then, I suppose, she would have married him; but at that time her husband was living. By the time M. Merle had rejoined—I won't say his ancestors, because he never had any—her relations with Osmond had changed, and she had grown more ambitious. Besides, she has never had, about him,' the Countess went on, leaving Isabel to wince for it so tragically afterwards—'she *had* never had, what you might call any illusions of *intelligence*. She hoped she might marry a great man; that has always been her idea. She has waited and watched and plotted and prayed; but she has never succeeded. I don't call Madame Merle a success, you know. I don't know what she may accomplish yet, but at present she has very little to show. The only tangible result she has ever achieved —except, of course, getting to know every one and staying with them free of expense—has been her bringing you and Osmond together. Oh, she did that, my dear; you needn't look as if you doubted it. I've watched them for years; I know everything—everything. I'm thought a great scatterbrain, but I've had enough application of mind to follow up those two. She hates me, and her way of showing it is to pretend to be for ever defending me. When people say I've had fifteen lovers she looks horrified and declares that quite half of them were never proved. She has been afraid of me for years, and she has taken great comfort in the vile, false things people have said about me. She has been afraid I'd expose her, and she threatened me one day when Osmond began to pay his court to you. It was at his house in Florence; do you remember that afternoon when she brought you there and we had tea in the garden? She let me know then that if I should tell tales two could play at that game. She pretends there's a good deal more to tell about me than about her. It would be an interesting comparison! I don't care a fig about what she may say, simply because I know *you* don't care a fig. You can't trouble your head about me less than you do already. So she may take her revenge as she chooses; I don't think she'll frighten you very much. Her

great idea has been to be tremendously irreproachable—a kind of full-blown lily—the incarnation of propriety. She has always worshipped that god. There should be no scandal about Cæsar's wife, you know; and, as I say, she has always hoped to marry Cæsar. That was one reason she wouldn't marry Osmond; the fear that on seeing her with Pansy people would put things together—would even see a resemblance. She has had a terror lest the mother should betray herself. She has been awfully careful; the mother has never done so.'

'Yes, yes, the mother has done so,' said Isabel, who had listened to all this with a face more and more wan. 'She betrayed herself to me the other day, though I didn't recognise her. There appeared to have been a chance of Pansy's making a great marriage, and in her disappointment at its not coming off she almost dropped the mask.'

'Ah, that's where she'd dish herself!' cried the Countess. 'She has failed so dreadfully that she's determined her daughter shall make it up.'

Isabel started at the words 'her daughter,' which her guest threw off so familiarly. 'It seems very wonderful,' she murmured; and in this bewildering impression she had almost lost her sense of being personally touched by the story.

'Now don't go and turn against the poor innocent child!' the Countess went on. 'She's very nice, in spite of her deplorable origin. I myself have liked Pansy; not, naturally, because she was *hers*, but because she had become yours.'

'Yes, she has become mine. And how the poor woman must have suffered at seeing me—!' Isabel exclaimed while she flushed at the thought.

'I don't believe she has suffered; on the contrary, she has enjoyed. Osmond's marriage has given his daughter a great little lift. Before that she lived in a hole. And do you know what the mother thought? That you might take such a fancy to the child that you'd do something for her. Osmond of course could never give her a portion. Osmond was really extremely poor; but of course you know all about that. Ah, my dear,' cried the Countess, 'why did you ever inherit money?' She stopped a moment as if she saw something singular in Isabel's face. 'Don't tell me now that you'll give her a *dot*. You're capable of that, but I would refuse to believe it. Don't try to be too good. Be a little easy and natural and nasty; feel a little wicked, for the comfort of it, once in your life!'

'It's very strange. I suppose I ought to know, but I'm sorry,' Isabel said. 'I'm much obliged to you.'

'Yes, you seem to be!' cried the Countess with a mocking laugh. 'Perhaps you are—perhaps you're not. You don't take it as I should have thought.'

'How should I take it?' Isabel asked.

'Well, I should say as a woman who has been made use of.' Isabel made no answer to this; she only listened, and the Countess went on. 'They've always been bound to each other; they remained so even after she broke off—or *he* did. But he has always been more for her than she has been for him. When their little carnival was over they made a bargain that each should give the other complete liberty, but that each should also do everything possible to help the other on. You may ask me how I know such a thing as that. I know it by the way they've behaved. Now see how much better women are than men! She has found a wife for Osmond, but Osmond has never lifted a little finger for *her*. She has worked for him, plotted for him, suffered for him; she has even more than once found money for him; and the end of it is that he's tired of her. She's an old habit; there are moments when he needs her, but on the whole he wouldn't miss her if she were removed. And, what's more, to-day she knows it. So you needn't be jealous!' the Countess added humorously.

Isabel rose from her sofa again; she felt bruised and scant of breath; her head was humming with new knowledge. 'I'm much obliged to you,' she repeated. And then she added abruptly, in quite a different tone: 'How do you know all this?'

This enquiry appeared to ruffle the Countess more than Isabel's expression of gratitude pleased her. She gave her companion a bold stare, with which, 'Let us assume that I've invented it!' she cried. She too, however, suddenly changed her tone and, laying her hand on Isabel's arm, said with the penetration of her sharp bright smile: 'Now will you give up your journey?'

Isabel started a little; she turned away. But she felt weak and in a moment had to lay her arm upon the mantel-shelf for support. She stood a minute so, and then upon her arm she dropped her dizzy head, with closed eyes and pale lips.

'I've done wrong to speak—I've made you ill!' the Countess cried.

'Ah, I must see Ralph!' Isabel wailed; not in resentment, not in the quick passion her companion had looked for; but in a tone of farreaching, infinite sadness.

LII

THERE was a train for Turin and Paris that evening; and after the Countess had left her Isabel had a rapid and decisive conference with her maid, who was discreet, devoted and active. After this she thought (except of her journey) only of one thing. She must go and see Pansy; from her she couldn't turn away. She had not seen her yet, as Osmond had given her to understand that it was too soon to begin. She drove at five o'clock to a high door in a narrow street in the quarter of the Piazza Navona,* and was admitted by the portress of the convent, a genial and obsequious person. Isabel had been at this institution before; she had come with Pansy to see the sisters. She knew they were good women, and she saw that the large rooms were clean and cheerful and that the well-used garden had sun for winter and shade for spring. But she disliked the place, which affronted and almost frightened her; not for the world would she have spent a night there. It produced to-day more than before the impression of a well-appointed prison; for it was not possible to pretend Pansy was free to leave it. This innocent creature had been presented to her in a new and violent light, but the secondary effect of the relation was to make her reach out a hand.

The portress left her to wait in the parlour of the convent while she went to make it known that there was a visitor for the dear young lady. The parlour was a vast, cold apartment, with new-looking furniture; a large clean stove of white porcelain, unlighted, a collection of wax flowers under glass, and a series of engravings from religious pictures on the walls. On the other occasion Isabel had thought it less like Rome than like Philadelphia, but to-day she made no reflexions; the apartment only seemed to her very empty and very soundless. The portress returned at the end of some five minutes, ushering in another person. Isabel got up, expecting to see one of the ladies of the sisterhood, but to her extreme surprise found herself confronted with Madame Merle. The effect was strange, for Madame Merle was already so present to her vision that her appearance in the flesh was like suddenly, and rather awfully, seeing a painted picture move. Isabel had been thinking all day of her falsity, her audacity, her ability, her probable suffering; and these dark things seemed to flash with a sudden light as she entered the room. Her being there at all had the character of ugly evidence, of handwritings, of profaned relics, of grim things produced in court. It made Isabel feel faint; if it had been necessary to speak on the spot she would have been quite unable. But no such necessity was distinct to her; it seemed to her indeed that she had absolutely nothing to say to Madame Merle. In one's relations with this lady, however, there were never any absolute necessities; she had a manner which carried off not only her own deficiencies but those of other people. But she was different from usual: she came in slowly, behind the portress, and Isabel instantly perceived that she was not likely to depend upon her habitual resources. For her too the occasion was exceptional, and she had undertaken to treat it by the light of the moment. This gave her a peculiar gravity; she pretended not even to smile, and though Isabel saw that she was more than ever playing a part it seemed to her that on the whole the wonderful woman had never been so natural. She looked at her young friend from head to foot, but not harshly nor defiantly; with a cold gentleness rather, and an absence of any air of allusion to their last meeting. It was as if she had wished to mark a distinction. She had been irritated then, she was reconciled now.

'You can leave us alone,' she said to the portress; 'in five minutes this lady will ring for you.' And then she turned to Isabel, who, after noting what had just been mentioned, had ceased to notice and had let her eyes wander as far as the limits of the room would allow. She wished never to look at Madame Merle again. 'You're surprised to find me here, and I'm afraid you're not pleased,' this lady went on. 'You don't see why I should have come; it's as if I had anticipated you. I confess I've been rather indiscreet—I ought to have asked your permission.' There was none of the oblique movement of irony in this; it was said simply and mildly; but Isabel, far afloat on a sea of wonder and pain, could not have told herself with what intention it was uttered. 'But I've not been sitting long,' Madame Merle continued; 'that is I've not been long with Pansy. I came to see her because it occurred to me this afternoon that she must be rather lonely and perhaps even a little miserable. It may be good for a small girl; I know so little about small girls; I can't tell. At any rate it's a little dismal. Therefore I came—on the chance. I knew of course that you'd come, and her father as well; still, I had not been told other visitors were forbidden. The good woman—what's her name? Madame Catherine—made no objection whatever. I stayed twenty minutes with Pansy; she has a charming little room, not in the least conventual, with a piano and flowers. She has arranged it delightfully; she has so much taste. Of course it's all none of my business, but I feel happier since I've seen her. She may even have a maid if she likes; but of course she has no occasion to dress. She

wears a little black frock; she looks so charming. I went afterwards to see Mother Catherine, who has a very good room too; I assure you I don't find the poor sisters at all monastic. Mother Catherine has a most coquettish little toilet-table, with something that looked uncommonly like a bottle of eau-de–Cologne. She speaks delightfully of Pansy; says it's a great happiness for them to have her. She's a little saint of heaven and a model to the oldest of them. Just as I was leaving Madame Catherine the portress came to say to her that there was a lady for the signorina. Of course I knew it must be you, and I asked her to let me go and receive you in her place. She demurred greatly—I must tell you that—and said it was her duty to notify the Mother Superior; it was of such high importance that you should be treated with respect. I requested her to let the Mother Superior alone and asked her how she supposed I would treat you!'

So Madame Merle went on, with much of the brilliancy of a woman who had long been a mistress of the art of conversation. But there were phases and gradations in her speech, not one of which was lost upon Isabel's ear, though her eyes were absent from her companion's face. She had not proceeded far before Isabel noted a sudden break in her voice, a lapse in her continuity, which was in itself a complete drama. This subtle modulation marked a momentous discovery—the perception of an entirely new attitude on the part of her listener. Madame Merle had guessed in the space of an instant that everything was at an end between them, and in the space of another instant she had guessed the reason why. The person who stood there was not the same one she had seen hitherto, but was a very different person—a person who knew her secret. This discovery was tremendous, and from the moment she made it the most accomplished of women faltered and lost her courage. But only for that moment. Then the conscious stream of her perfect manner gathered itself again and flowed on as smoothly as might be to the end. But it was only because she had the end in view that she was able to proceed. She had been touched with a point that made her quiver, and she needed all the alertness of her will to repress her agitation. Her only safety was in her not betraying herself. She resisted this, but the startled quality of her voice refused to improve—she couldn't help it—while she heard herself say she hardly knew what. The tide of her confidence ebbed, and she was able only just to glide into port, faintly grazing the bottom.

Isabel saw it all as distinctly as if it had been reflected in a large clear glass. It might have been a great moment for her, for it might have been a moment of triumph. That Madame Merle had lost her pluck and saw before her the phantom of exposure—this in itself was a revenge, this in itself was almost the promise of a brighter day. And for a moment during which she stood apparently looking out of the window, with her back half-turned, Isabel enjoyed that knowledge. On the other side of the window lay the garden of the convent; but this is not what she saw; she saw nothing of the budding plants and the glowing afternoon. She saw, in the crude light of that revelation which had already become a part of experience and to which the very frailty of the vessel in which it had been offered her only gave an intrinsic price, the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron. All the bitterness of this knowledge surged into her soul again; it was as if she felt on her lips the taste of dishonour. There was a moment during which, if she had turned and spoken, she would have said something that would hiss like a lash. But she closed her eyes, and then the hideous vision dropped. What remained was the cleverest woman in the world standing there within a few feet of her and knowing as little what to think as the meanest. Isabel's only revenge was to be silent still—to leave Madame Merle in this unprecedented situation. She left her there for a period that must have seemed long to this lady, who at last seated herself with a movement which was in itself a confession of helplessness. Then Isabel turned slow eyes, looking down at her. Madame Merle was very pale; her own eyes covered Isabel's face. She might see what she would, but her danger was over. Isabel would never accuse her, never reproach her; perhaps because she never would give her the opportunity to defend herself.

'I'm come to bid Pansy good-bye,' our young woman said at last. 'I go to England to-night.'

'Go to England to-night!' Madame Merle repeated sitting there and looking up at her.

'I'm going to Gardencourt. Ralph Touchett's dying.'

'Ah, you'll feel that.' Madame Merle recovered herself; she had a chance to express sympathy. 'Do you go alone?'

'Yes; without my husband.'

Madame Merle gave a low vague murmur; a sort of recognition of the general sadness of things. 'Mr Touchett never liked me, but I'm sorry he's dying. Shall you see his mother?'

'Yes; she has returned from America.'

'She used to be very kind to me; but she has changed. Others too have changed,' said Madame Merle with a quiet noble pathos. She paused a moment, then added: 'And you'll see dear old Gardencourt again!'

‘I shall not enjoy it much,’ Isabel answered.

‘Naturally—in your grief. But it’s on the whole, of all the houses I know, and I know many, the one I should have liked best to live in. I don’t venture to send a message to the people,’ Madame Merle added; ‘but I should like to give my love to the place.’

Isabel turned away. ‘I had better go to Pansy. I’ve not much time.’

While she looked about her for the proper egress, the door opened and admitted one of the ladies of the house, who advanced with a discreet smile, gently rubbing, under her long loose sleeves, a pair of plump white hands. Isabel recognised Madame Catherine, whose acquaintance she had already made, and begged that she would immediately let her see Miss Osmond. Madame Catherine looked doubly discreet, but smiled very blandly and said: ‘It will be good for her to see you. I’ll take you to her myself.’ Then she directed her pleased guarded vision to Madame Merle.

‘Will you let me remain a little?’ this lady asked. ‘It’s so good to be here.’

‘You may remain always if you like!’ And the good sister gave a knowing laugh.

She led Isabel out of the room, through several corridors, and up a long staircase. All these departments were solid and bare, light and clean; so, thought Isabel, are the great penal establishments. Madame Catherine gently pushed open the door of Pansy’s room and ushered in the visitor; then stood smiling with folded hands while the two others met and embraced.

‘She’s glad to see you,’ she repeated; ‘it will do her good.’ And she placed the best chair carefully for Isabel. But she made no movement to seat herself; she seemed ready to retire. ‘How does this dear child look?’ she asked of Isabel, lingering a moment.

‘She looks pale,’ Isabel answered.

‘That’s the pleasure of seeing you. She’s very happy. *Elle éclaire la maison*,’* said the good sister.

Pansy wore, as Madame Merle had said, a little black dress; it was perhaps this that made her look pale. ‘They’re very good to me—they think of everything!’ she exclaimed with all her customary eagerness to accommodate.

‘We think of you always—you’re a precious charge,’ Madame Catherine remarked in the tone of a woman with whom benevolence was a habit and whose conception of duty was the acceptance of every care. It fell with a leaden weight on Isabel’s ears; it seemed to represent the surrender of a personality, the authority of the Church.

When Madame Catherine had left them together Pansy kneeled down and hid her head in her stepmother’s lap. So she remained some moments, while Isabel gently stroked her hair. Then she got up, averting her face and looking about the room. ‘Don’t you think I’ve arranged it well? I’ve everything I have at home.’

‘It’s very pretty; you’re very comfortable.’ Isabel scarcely knew what she could say to her. On the one hand she couldn’t let her think she had come to pity her, and on the other it would be a dull mockery to pretend to rejoice with her. So she simply added after a moment: ‘I’ve come to bid you good-bye. I’m going to England.’

Pansy’s white little face turned red. ‘To England! Not to come back?’

‘I don’t know when I shall come back.’

‘Ah, I’m sorry,’ Pansy breathed with faintness. She spoke as if she had no right to criticise; but her tone expressed a depth of disappointment.

‘My cousin, Mr Touchett, is very ill; he’ll probably die. I wish to see him,’ Isabel said.

‘Ah yes; you told me he would die. Of course you must go. And will papa go?’

‘No; I shall go alone.’

For a moment the girl said nothing. Isabel had often wondered what she thought of the apparent relations of her father with his wife; but never by a glance, by an intimation, had she let it be seen that she deemed them deficient in an air of intimacy. She made her reflexions, Isabel was sure; and she must have had a conviction that there were husbands and wives who were more intimate than that. But Pansy was not indiscreet even in thought; she would as little have ventured to judge her gentle stepmother as to criticise her magnificent father. Her heart may have stood almost as still as it would have done had she seen two of the saints in the great picture in the convent-chapel turn their painted heads and shake them at each other. But as in this latter case she would (for very solemnity’s sake) never have mentioned the awful phenomenon, so she put away all knowledge of the secrets of larger lives than her own. ‘You’ll be very far away,’ she presently went on.

‘Yes; I shall be far away. But it will scarcely matter,’ Isabel explained; ‘since so long as you’re here I

can't be called near you.'

'Yes, but you can come and see me; though you've not come very often.'

'I've not come because your father forbade it. To-day I bring nothing with me. I can't amuse you.'

'I'm not to be amused. That's not what papa wishes.'

'Then it hardly matters whether I'm in Rome or in England.'

'You're not happy, Mrs Osmond,' said Pansy.

'Not very. But it doesn't matter.'

'That's what I say to myself. What does it matter? But I should like to come out.'

'I wish indeed you might.'

'Don't leave me here,' Pansy went on gently.

Isabel said nothing for a minute; her heart beat fast. 'Will you come away with me now?' she asked.

Pansy looked at her pleadingly. 'Did papa tell you to bring me?'

'No; it's my own proposal.'

'I think I had better wait then. Did papa send me no message?'

'I don't think he knew I was coming.'

'He thinks I've not had enough,' said Pansy. 'But I have. The ladies are very kind to me and the little girls come to see me. There are some very little ones—such charming children. Then my room—you can see for yourself. All that's very delightful. But I've had enough. Papa wished me to think a little—and I've thought a great deal.'

'What have you thought?'

'Well, that I must never displease papa.'

'You knew that before.'

'Yes; but I know it better. I'll do anything—I'll do anything,' said Pansy. Then, as she heard her own words, a deep, pure blush came into her face. Isabel read the meaning of it; she saw the poor girl had been vanquished. It was well that Mr Edward Rosier had kept his enamels! Isabel looked into her eyes and saw there mainly a prayer to be treated easily. She laid her hand on Pansy's as if to let her know that her look conveyed no diminution of esteem; for the collapse of the girl's momentary resistance (mute and modest though it had been) seemed only her tribute to the truth of things. She didn't presume to judge others, but she had judged herself; she had seen the reality. She had no vocation for struggling with combinations; in the solemnity of sequestration there was something that overwhelmed her. She bowed her pretty head to authority and only asked of authority to be merciful. Yes; it was very well that Edward Rosier had reserved a few articles!

Isabel got up; her time was rapidly shortening. 'Good-bye then. I leave Rome to-night.'

Pansy took hold of her dress; there was a sudden change in the child's face. 'You look strange; you frighten me.'

'Oh, I'm very harmless,' said Isabel.

'Perhaps you won't come back?'

'Perhaps not. I can't tell.'

'Ah, Mrs Osmond, you won't leave me!'

Isabel now saw she had guessed everything. 'My dear child, what can I do for you?' she asked.

'I don't know—but I'm happier when I think of you.'

'You can always think of me.'

'Not when you're so far. I'm a little afraid,' said Pansy.

'What are you afraid of?'

'Of papa—a little. And of Madame Merle. She has just been to see me.'

'You must not say that,' Isabel observed.

'Oh, I'll do everything they want. Only if you're here I shall do it more easily.'

Isabel considered. 'I won't desert you,' she said at last. 'Good-bye, my child.'

Then they held each other a moment in a silent embrace, like two sisters; and afterwards Pansy walked along the corridor with her visitor to the top of the staircase. 'Madame Merle has been here,' she remarked as they went; and as Isabel answered nothing she added abruptly: 'I don't like Madame Merle!'

Isabel hesitated, then stopped. 'You must never say that—that you don't like Madame Merle.'

Pansy looked at her in wonder; but wonder with Pansy had never been a reason for non-compliance. ‘I never will again,’ she said with exquisite gentleness. At the top of the staircase they had to separate, as it appeared to be part of the mild but very definite discipline under which Pansy lived that she should not go down. Isabel descended, and when she reached the bottom the girl was standing above. ‘You’ll come back?’ she called out in a voice that Isabel remembered afterwards.

‘Yes—I’ll come back.’

Madame Catherine met Mrs Osmond below and conducted her to the door of the parlour, outside of which the two stood talking a minute. ‘I won’t go in,’ said the good sister. ‘Madame Merle’s waiting for you.’

At this announcement Isabel stiffened; she was on the point of asking if there were no other egress from the convent. But a moment’s reflexion assured her that she would do well not to betray to the worthy nun her desire to avoid Pansy’s other friend. Her companion grasped her arm very gently and, fixing her a moment with wise, benevolent eyes, said in French and almost familiarly: ‘*Eh, bien, chère Madame, qu ’en pensez-vous?*’*

‘About my step-daughter? Oh, it would take long to tell you.’

‘We think it’s enough,’ Madame Catherine distinctly observed. And she pushed open the door of the parlour.

Madame Merle was sitting just as Isabel had left her, like a woman so absorbed in thought that she had not moved a little finger. As Madame Catherine closed the door she got up, and Isabel saw that she had been thinking to some purpose. She had recovered her balance; she was in full possession of her resources. ‘I found I wished to wait for you,’ she said urbanely. ‘But it’s not to talk about Pansy.’

Isabel wondered what it could be to talk about, and in spite of Madame Merle’s declaration she answered after a moment: ‘Madame Catherine says it’s enough.’

‘Yes; it also seems to me enough. I wanted to ask you another word about poor Mr Touchett,’ Madame Merle added. ‘Have you reason to believe that he’s really at his last?’

‘I’ve no information but a telegram. Unfortunately it only confirms a probability.’

‘I’m going to ask you a strange question,’ said Madame Merle. ‘Are you very fond of your cousin?’ And she gave a smile as strange as her utterance.

‘Yes, I’m very fond of him. But I don’t understand you.’

She just hung fire. ‘It’s rather hard to explain. Something has occurred to me which may not have occurred to you, and I give you the benefit of my idea. Your cousin did you once a great service. Have you never guessed it?’

‘He has done me many services.’

‘Yes; but one was much above the rest. He made you a rich woman.’

‘*He* made me—?’

Madame Merle appearing to see herself successful, she went on more triumphantly: ‘He imparted to you that extra lustre which was required to make you a brilliant match. At bottom it’s him you’ve to thank.’ She stopped; there was something in Isabel’s eyes.

‘I don’t understand you. It was my uncle’s money.’

‘Yes; it was your uncle’s money, but it was your cousin’s idea. He brought his father over to it. Ah, my dear, the sum was large!’

Isabel stood staring; she seemed to-day to live in a world illumined by lurid flashes. ‘I don’t know why you say such things. I don’t know what you know.’

‘I know nothing but what I’ve guessed. But I’ve guessed that.’

Isabel went to the door and, when she had opened it, stood a moment with her hand on the latch. Then she said—it was her only revenge: ‘I believed it was you I had to thank!’

Madame Merle dropped her eyes; she stood there in a kind of proud penance. ‘You’re very unhappy, I know. But I’m more so.’

‘Yes; I can believe that. I think I should like never to see you again.’

Madame Merle raised her eyes. ‘I shall go to America,’ she quietly remarked while Isabel passed out.

LIII

IT was not with surprise, it was with a feeling which in other circumstances would have had much of the effect of joy, that as Isabel descended from the Paris Mail at Charing Cross she stepped into the arms, as it were—or at any rate into the hands—of Henrietta Stackpole. She had telegraphed to her friend from Turin, and though she had not definitely said to herself that Henrietta would meet her, she had felt her telegram would produce some helpful result. On her long journey from Rome her mind had been given up to vagueness; she was unable to question the future. She performed this journey with sightless eyes and took little pleasure in the countries she traversed, decked out though they were in the richest freshness of spring. Her thoughts followed their course through other countries—strange-looking, dimly-lighted, pathless lands, in which there was no change of seasons, but only, as it seemed, a perpetual dreariness of winter. She had plenty to think about; but it was neither reflexion nor conscious purpose that filled her mind. Disconnected visions passed through it, and sudden gleams of memory, of expectation. The past and the future came and went at their will, but she saw them only in fitful images, which rose and fell by a logic of their own. It was extraordinary the things she remembered. Now that she was in the secret, now that she knew something that so much concerned her and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness. She remembered a thousand trifles; they started to life with the spontaneity of a shiver. She had thought them trifles at the time; now she saw that they had been weighted with lead. Yet even now they were trifles after all, for of what use was it to her to understand them? Nothing seemed of use to her to-day. All purpose, all intention, was suspended; all desire too save the single desire to reach her much-embracing refuge. Gardencourt had been her starting-point, and to those muffled chambers it was at least a temporary solution to return. She had gone forth in her strength; she would come back in her weakness, and if the place had been a rest to her before, it would be a sanctuary now. She envied Ralph his dying, for if one were thinking of rest that was the most perfect of all. To cease utterly, to give it all up and not know anything more—this idea was as sweet as the vision of a cool bath in a marble tank, in a darkened chamber, in a hot land.

She had moments indeed in her journey from Rome which were almost as good as being dead. She sat in her corner, so motionless, so passive, simply with the sense of being carried, so detached from hope and regret, that she recalled to herself one of those Etruscan figures* couched upon the receptacle of their ashes. There was nothing to regret now—that was all over. Not only the time of her folly, but the time of her repentance was far. The only thing to regret was that Madame Merle had been so—well, so unimaginable. Just here her intelligence dropped, from literal inability to say what it was that Madame Merle had been. Whatever it was it was for Madame Merle herself to regret it; and doubtless she would do so in America, where she had announced she was going. It concerned Isabel no more; she only had an impression that she should never again see Madame Merle. This impression carried her into the future, of which from time to time she had a mutilated glimpse. She saw herself, in the distant years, still in the attitude of a woman who had her life to live, and these intimations contradicted the spirit of the present hour. It might be desirable to get quite away, really away, further away than little grey-green England, but this privilege was evidently to be denied her. Deep in her soul—deeper than any appetite for renunciation—was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. And at moments there was something inspiring, almost enlivening, in the conviction. It was a proof of strength—it was a proof she should some day be happy again. It couldn't be she was to live only to suffer; she was still young, after all, and a great many things might happen to her yet. To live only to suffer—only to feel the injury of life repeated and enlarged—it seemed to her she was too valuable, too capable, for that. Then she wondered if it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself. When had it even been a guarantee to be valuable? Wasn't all history full of the destruction of precious things? Wasn't it much more probable that if one were fine one would suffer? It involved then perhaps an admission that one had a certain grossness; but Isabel recognised, as it passed before her eyes, the quick vague shadow of a long future. She should never escape; she should last to the end. Then the middle years wrapped her about again and the grey curtain of her indifference closed her in.

Henrietta kissed her, as Henrietta usually kissed, as if she were afraid she should be caught doing it; and then Isabel stood there in the crowd, looking about her, looking for her servant. She asked nothing;

she wished to wait. She had a sudden perception that she should be helped. She rejoiced Henrietta had come; there was something terrible in an arrival in London. The dusky, smoky, far-arching vault of the station, the strange, livid light, the dense, dark, pushing crowd, filled her with a nervous fear and made her put her arm into her friend's. She remembered she had once liked these things; they seemed part of a mighty spectacle in which there was something that touched her. She remembered how she walked away from Euston, in the winter dusk, in the crowded streets, five years before. She could not have done that to-day, and the incident came before her as the deed of another person.

'It's too beautiful that you should have come,' said Henrietta, looking at her as if she thought Isabel might be prepared to challenge the proposition. 'If you hadn't—if you hadn't; well, I don't know,' remarked Miss Stackpole, hinting ominously at her powers of disapproval.

Isabel looked about without seeing her maid. Her eyes rested on another figure, however, which she felt she had seen before; and in a moment she recognised the genial countenance of Mr Bantling. He stood a little apart, and it was not in the power of the multitude that pressed about him to make him yield an inch of the ground he had taken—that of abstracting himself discreetly while the two ladies performed their embraces.

'There's Mr Bantling,' said Isabel, gently, irrelevantly, scarcely caring much now whether she should find her maid or not.

'Oh yes, he goes everywhere with me. Come here, Mr Bantling!' Henrietta exclaimed. Whereupon the gallant bachelor advanced with a smile—a smile tempered, however, by the gravity of the occasion. 'Isn't it lovely she has come?' Henrietta asked. 'He knows all about it,' she added; 'we had quite a discussion. He said you wouldn't, I said you would.'

'I thought you always agreed,' Isabel smiled in return. She felt she could smile now; she had seen in an instant, in Mr Bantling's brave eyes, that he had good news for her. They seemed to say he wished her to remember he was an old friend of her cousin—that he understood, that it was all right. Isabel gave him her hand; she thought of him, extravagantly, as a beautiful blameless knight.*

'Oh, I always agree,' said Mr Bantling. 'But she doesn't, you know.'

'Didn't I tell you that a maid was a nuisance?' Henrietta enquired. 'Your young lady has probably remained at Calais.'

'I don't care,' said Isabel, looking at Mr Bantling, whom she had never found so interesting.

'Stay with her while I go and see,' Henrietta commanded, leaving the two for a moment together.

They stood there at first in silence, and then Mr Bantling asked Isabel how it had been on the Channel.

'Very fine. No, I believe it was very rough,' she said, to her companion's obvious surprise. After which she added: 'You've been to Gardencourt, I know.'

'Now how do you know that?'

'I can't tell you—except that you look like a person who has been to Gardencourt.'

'Do you think I look awfully sad? It's awfully sad there, you know.'

'I don't believe you ever look awfully sad. You look awfully kind,' said Isabel with a breadth that cost her no effort. It seemed to her she should never again feel a superficial embarrassment.

Poor Mr Bantling, however, was still in this inferior stage. He blushed a good deal and laughed, he assured her that he was often very blue, and that when he was blue he was awfully fierce. 'You can ask Miss Stackpole, you know. I was at Gardencourt two days ago.'

'Did you see my cousin?'

'Only for a little. But he had been seeing people; Warburton had been there the day before. Ralph was just the same as usual, except that he was in bed and that he looks tremendously ill and that he can't speak,' Mr Bantling pursued. 'He was awfully jolly and funny all the same. He was just as clever as ever. It's awfully wretched.'

Even in the crowded, noisy station this simple picture was vivid. 'Was that late in the day?'

'Yes; I went on purpose. We thought you'd like to know.'

'I'm greatly obliged to you. Can I go down to-night?'

'Ah, I don't think *she'll* let you go,' said Mr Bantling. 'She wants you to stop with her. I made Touchett's man promise to telegraph me to-day, and I found the telegram an hour ago at my club. "Quiet and easy," that's what it says, and it's dated two o'clock. So you see you can wait till tomorrow. You must be awfully tired.'

'Yes, I'm awfully tired. And I thank you again.'

‘Oh,’ said Mr Bantling, ‘we were certain you would like the last news.’ On which Isabel vaguely noted that he and Henrietta seemed after all to agree. Miss Stackpole came back with Isabel’s maid, whom she had caught in the act of proving her utility. This excellent person, instead of losing herself in the crowd, had simply attended to her mistress’s luggage, so that the latter was now at liberty to leave the station. ‘You know you’re not to think of going to the country tonight,’ Henrietta remarked to her. ‘It doesn’t matter whether there’s a train or not. You’re to come straight to me in Wimpole Street. There isn’t a corner to be had in London, but I’ve got you one all the same. It isn’t a Roman palace, but it will do for a night.’

‘I’ll do whatever you wish,’ Isabel said.

‘You’ll come and answer a few questions; that’s what I wish.’

‘She doesn’t say anything about dinner, does she, Mrs Osmond?’ Mr Bantling enquired jocosely.

Henrietta fixed him a moment with her speculative gaze. ‘I see you’re in a great hurry to get your own. You’ll be at the Paddington Station to-morrow morning at ten.’

‘Don’t come for my sake, Mr Bantling,’ said Isabel.

‘He’ll come for mine,’ Henrietta declared as she ushered her friend into a cab. And later, in a large dusky parlour in Wimpole Street—to do her justice there had been dinner enough—she asked those questions to which she had alluded at the station. ‘Did your husband make you a scene about your coming?’ That was Miss Stackpole’s first enquiry.

‘No; I can’t say he made a scene.’

‘He didn’t object then?’

‘Yes, he objected very much. But it was not what you’d call a scene.’

‘What was it then?’

‘It was a very quiet conversation.’

Henrietta for a moment regarded her guest. ‘It must have been hellish,’ she then remarked. And Isabel didn’t deny that it had been hellish. But she confined herself to answering Henrietta’s questions, which was easy, as they were tolerably definite. For the present she offered her no new information. ‘Well,’ said Miss Stackpole at last, ‘I’ve only one criticism to make. I don’t see why you promised little Miss Osmond to go back.’

‘I’m not sure I myself see now,’ Isabel replied. ‘But I did then.’

‘If you’ve forgotten your reason perhaps you won’t return.’

Isabel waited a moment. ‘Perhaps I shall find another.’

‘You’ll certainly never find a good one.’

‘In default of a better my having promised will do,’ Isabel suggested.

‘Yes; that’s why I hate it.’

‘Don’t speak of it now. I’ve a little time. Coming away was a complication, but what will going back be?’

‘You must remember, after all, that he won’t make you a scene!’ said Henrietta with much intention.

‘He will, though,’ Isabel answered gravely. ‘It won’t be the scene of a moment; it will be a scene of the rest of my life.’

For some minutes the two women sat and considered this remainder, and then Miss Stackpole, to change the subject, as Isabel had requested, announced abruptly: ‘I’ve been to stay with Lady Pensil!’

‘Ah, the invitation came at last!’

‘Yes; it took five years. But this time she wanted to see me.’

‘Naturally enough.’

‘It was more natural than I think you know,’ said Henrietta, who fixed her eyes on a distant point. And then she added, turning suddenly: ‘Isabel Archer, I beg your pardon. You don’t know why? Because I criticised you, and yet I’ve gone further than you. Mr Osmond, at least, was born on the other side!’

It was a moment before Isabel grasped her meaning; this sense was so modestly, or at least so ingeniously, veiled. Isabel’s mind was not possessed at present with the comicality of things; but she greeted with a quick laugh the image that her companion had raised. She immediately recovered herself, however, and with the right excess of intensity, ‘Henrietta Stackpole,’ she asked, ‘are you going to give up your country?’

‘Yes, my poor Isabel, I am. I won’t pretend to deny it; I look the fact in the face. I’m going to marry Mr Bantling and locate right here in London.’

‘It seems very strange,’ said Isabel, smiling now.

‘Well yes, I suppose it does. I’ve come to it little by little. I think I know what I’m doing; but I don’t know as I can explain.’

‘One can’t explain one’s marriage,’ Isabel answered. ‘And yours doesn’t need to be explained. Mr Bantling isn’t a riddle.’

‘No, he isn’t a bad pun—or even a high flight of American humour. He has a beautiful nature,’ Henrietta went on. ‘I’ve studied him for many years and I see right through him. He’s as clear as the style of a good prospectus. He’s not intellectual, but he appreciates intellect. On the other hand he doesn’t exaggerate its claims. I sometimes think we do in the United States.’

‘Ah,’ said Isabel, ‘you’re changed indeed! It’s the first time I’ve ever heard you say anything against your native land.’

‘I only say that we’re too infatuated with mere brainpower; that, after all, isn’t a vulgar fault. But I *am* changed; a woman has to change a good deal to marry.’

‘I hope you’ll be very happy. You will at last—over here—see something of the inner life.’

Henrietta gave a little significant sigh. ‘That’s the key to the mystery, I believe. I couldn’t endure to be kept off. Now I’ve as good a right as any one!’ she added with artless elation.

Isabel was duly diverted, but there was a certain melancholy in her view. Henrietta, after all, had confessed herself human and feminine, Henrietta whom she had hitherto regarded as a light keen flame, a disembodied voice. It was a disappointment to find she had personal susceptibilities, that she was subject to common passions, and that her intimacy with Mr Bantling had not been completely original. There was a want of originality in her marrying him—there was even a kind of stupidity; and for a moment, to Isabel’s sense, the dreariness of the world took on a deeper tinge. A little later indeed she reflected that Mr Bantling himself at least was original. But she didn’t see how Henrietta could give up her country. She herself had relaxed her hold of it, but it had never been her country as it had been Henrietta’s. She presently asked her if she had enjoyed her visit to Lady Pensil.

‘Oh yes,’ said Henrietta, ‘she didn’t know what to make of me.’

‘And was that very enjoyable?’

‘Very much so, because she’s supposed to be a master mind. She thinks she knows everything; but she doesn’t understand a woman of my modern type. It would be so much easier for her if I were only a little better or a little worse. She’s so puzzled; I believe she thinks it’s my duty to go and do something immoral. She thinks it’s immoral that I should marry her brother; but, after all, that isn’t immoral enough. And she’ll never understand my mixture—never!’

‘She’s not so intelligent as her brother then,’ said Isabel. ‘He appears to have understood.’

‘Oh no, he hasn’t!’ cried Miss Stackpole with decision. ‘I really believe that’s what he wants to marry me for—just to find out the mystery and the proportions of it. That’s a fixed idea—a kind of fascination.’

‘It’s very good in you to humour it.’

‘Oh well,’ said Henrietta, ‘I’ve something to find out too!’ And Isabel saw that she had not renounced an allegiance, but planned an attack. She was at last about to grapple in earnest with England.

Isabel also perceived, however, on the morrow, at the Paddington Station, where she found herself, at ten o’clock, in the company both of Miss Stackpole and Mr Bantling, that the gentleman bore his perplexities lightly. If he had not found out everything he had found out at least the great point—that Miss Stackpole would not be wanting in initiative. It was evident that in the selection of a wife he had been on his guard against this deficiency.

‘Henrietta has told me, and I’m very glad,’ Isabel said as she gave him her hand.

‘I dare say you think it awfully odd,’ Mr Bantling replied, resting on his neat umbrella.

‘Yes, I think it awfully odd.’

‘You can’t think it so awfully odd as I do. But I’ve always rather liked striking out a line,’ said Mr Bantling serenely.

LIV

ISABEL's arrival at Gardencourt on this second occasion was even quieter than it had been on the first. Ralph Touchett kept but a small household, and to the new servants Mrs Osmond was a stranger; so that instead of being conducted to her own apartment she was coldly shown into the drawing-room and left to wait while her name was carried up to her aunt. She waited a long time; Mrs Touchett appeared in no hurry to come to her. She grew impatient at last; she grew nervous and scared—as scared as if the objects about her had begun to show for conscious things, watching her trouble with grotesque grimaces. The day was dark and cold; the dusk was thick in the corners of the wide brown rooms. The house was perfectly still—with a stillness that Isabel remembered; it had filled all the place for days before the death of her uncle. She left the drawingroom and wandered about—strolled into the library and along the gallery of pictures, where, in the deep silence, her footstep made an echo. Nothing was changed; she recognised everything she had seen years before; it might have been only yesterday she had stood there. She envied the security of valuable 'pieces' which change by no hair's breadth, only grow in value, while their owners lose inch by inch youth, happiness, beauty; and she became aware that she was walking about as her aunt had done on the day she had come to see her in Albany. She was changed enough since then—that had been the beginning. It suddenly struck her that if her Aunt Lydia had not come that day in just that way and found her alone, everything might have been different. She might have had another life and she might have been a woman more blest. She stopped in the gallery in front of a small picture—a charming and precious Bonington*—upon which her eyes rested a long time. But she was not looking at the picture; she was wondering whether if her aunt had not come that day in Albany she would have married Caspar Goodwood.

Mrs Touchett appeared at last, just after Isabel had returned to the big uninhabited drawing-room. She looked a good deal older, but her eye was as bright as ever and her head as erect; her thin lips seemed a repository of latent meanings. She wore a little grey dress of the most undecorated fashion, and Isabel wondered, as she had wondered the first time, if her remarkable kinswoman resembled more a queen-regent or the matron of a gaol. Her lips felt very thin indeed on Isabel's hot cheek.

'I've kept you waiting because I've been sitting with Ralph,' Mrs Touchett said. 'The nurse had gone to luncheon and I had taken her place. He has a man who's supposed to look after him, but the man's good for nothing; he's always looking out of the window—as if there were anything to see! I didn't wish to move, because Ralph seemed to be sleeping and I was afraid the sound would disturb him. I waited till the nurse came back. I remembered you knew the house.'

'I find I know it better even than I thought; I've been walking everywhere,' Isabel answered. And then she asked if Ralph slept much.

'He lies with his eyes closed; he doesn't move. But I'm not sure that it's always sleep.'

'Will he see me? Can he speak to me?'

Mrs Touchett declined the office of saying. 'You can try him,' was the limit of her extravagance. And then she offered to conduct Isabel to her room. 'I thought they had taken you there; but it's not my house, it's Ralph's; and I don't know what they do. They must at least have taken your luggage; I don't suppose you've brought much. Not that I care, however. I believe they've given you the same room you had before; when Ralph heard you were coming he said you must have that one.'

'Did he say anything else?'

'Ah, my dear, he doesn't chatter as he used!' cried Mrs Touchett as she preceded her niece up the staircase.

It was the same room, and something told Isabel it had not been slept in since she occupied it. Her luggage was there and was not voluminous; Mrs Touchett sat down a moment with her eyes upon it. 'Is there really no hope?' our young woman asked as she stood before her.

'None whatever. There never has been. It has not been a successful life.'

'No—it has only been a beautiful one.' Isabel found herself already contradicting her aunt; she was irritated by her dryness.

'I don't know what you mean by that; there's no beauty without health. That is a very odd dress to travel in.'

Isabel glanced at her garment. ‘I left Rome at an hour’s notice; I took the first that came.’

‘Your sisters, in America, wished to know how you dress. That seemed to be their principal interest. I wasn’t able to tell them—but they seemed to have the right idea: that you never wear anything less than black brocade.’

‘They think I’m more brilliant than I am; I’m afraid to tell them the truth,’ said Isabel. ‘Lily wrote me you had dined with her.’

‘She invited me four times, and I went once. After the second time she should have let me alone. The dinner was very good; it must have been expensive. Her husband has a very bad manner. Did I enjoy my visit to America? Why should I have enjoyed it? I didn’t go for my pleasure.’

These were interesting items, but Mrs Touchett soon left her niece, whom she was to meet in half an hour at the midday meal. For this repast the two ladies faced each other at an abbreviated table in the melancholy dining-room. Here, after a little, Isabel saw her aunt not to be so dry as she appeared, and her old pity for the poor woman’s inexpressiveness, her want of regret, of disappointment, came back to her. Unmistakeably she would have found it a blessing to-day to be able to feel a defeat, a mistake, even a shame or two. She wondered if she were not even missing those enrichments of consciousness and privately trying—reaching out for some aftertaste of life, dregs of the banquet; the testimony of pain or the cold recreation of remorse. On the other hand perhaps she was afraid; if she should begin to know remorse at all it might take her too far. Isabel could perceive, however, how it had come over her dimly that she had failed of something, that she saw herself in the future as an old woman without memories. Her little sharp face looked tragical. She told her niece that Ralph had as yet not moved, but that he probably would be able to see her before dinner. And then in a moment she added that he had seen Lord Warburton the day before; an announcement which startled Isabel a little, as it seemed an intimation that this personage was in the neighbourhood and that an accident might bring them together. Such an accident would not be happy; she had not come to England to struggle again with Lord Warburton. She none the less presently said to her aunt that he had been very kind to Ralph; she had seen something of that in Rome.

‘He has something else to think of now,’ Mrs Touchett returned. And she paused with a gaze like a gimlet.

Isabel saw she meant something, and instantly guessed what she meant. But her reply concealed her guess; her heart beat faster and she wished to gain a moment. ‘Ah yes—the House of Lords and all that.’

‘He’s not thinking of the Lords; he’s thinking of the ladies. At least he’s thinking of one of them; he told Ralph he’s engaged to be married.’

‘Ah, to be married!’ Isabel mildly exclaimed.

‘Unless he breaks it off. He seemed to think Ralph would like to know. Poor Ralph can’t go to the wedding, though I believe it’s to take place very soon.’

‘And who’s the young lady?’

‘A member of the aristocracy; Lady Flora, Lady Felicia—something of that sort.’

‘I’m very glad,’ Isabel said. ‘It must be a sudden decision.’

‘Sudden enough, I believe; a courtship of three weeks. It has only just been made public.’

‘I’m very glad,’ Isabel repeated with a larger emphasis. She knew her aunt was watching her—looking for the signs of some imputed soreness, and the desire to prevent her companion from seeing anything of this kind enabled her to speak in the tone of quick satisfaction, the tone almost of relief. Mrs Touchett of course followed the tradition that ladies, even married ones, regard the marriage of their old lovers as an offence to themselves. Isabel’s first care therefore was to show that however that might be in general she was not offended now. But meanwhile, as I say, her heart beat faster; and if she sat for some moments thoughtful—she presently forgot Mrs Touchett’s observation—it was not because she had lost an admirer. Her imagination had traversed half Europe; it halted, panting, and even trembling a little, in the city of Rome. She figured herself announcing to her husband that Lord Warburton was to lead a bride to the altar, and she was of course not aware how extremely wan she must have looked while she made this intellectual effort. But at last she collected herself and said to her aunt: ‘He was sure to do it some time or other.’

Mrs Touchett was silent; then she gave a sharp little shake of the head. ‘Ah, my dear, you’re beyond me!’ she cried suddenly. They went on with their luncheon in silence; Isabel felt as if she had heard of Lord Warburton’s death. She had known him only as a suitor, and now that was all over. He was dead for poor Pansy; by Pansy he might have lived. A servant had been hovering about; at last Mrs Touchett requested him to leave them alone. She had finished her meal; she sat with her hands folded on the edge

of the table. ‘I should like to ask you three questions,’ she observed when the servant had gone.

‘Three are a great many.’

‘I can’t do with less; I’ve been thinking. They’re all very good ones.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of. The best questions are the worst,’ Isabel answered. Mrs Touchett had pushed back her chair, and as her niece left the table and walked, rather consciously, to one of the deep windows, she felt herself followed by her eyes.

‘Have you ever been sorry you didn’t marry Lord Warburton?’ Mrs Touchett enquired.

Isabel shook her head slowly, but not heavily. ‘No, dear aunt.’

‘Good. I ought to tell you that I propose to believe what you say.’

‘Your believing me’s an immense temptation,’ she declared, smiling still.

‘A temptation to lie? I don’t recommend you to do that, for when I’m misinformed I’m as dangerous as a poisoned rat. I don’t mean to crow over you.’

‘It’s my husband who doesn’t get on with me,’ said Isabel.

‘I could have told him he wouldn’t. I don’t call that crowing over *you*,’ Mrs Touchett added. ‘Do you still like Serena Merle?’ she went on.

‘Not as I once did. But it doesn’t matter, for she’s going to America.’

‘To America? She must have done something very bad.’

‘Yes—very bad.’

‘May I ask what it is?’

‘She made a convenience of me.’

‘Ah,’ cried Mrs Touchett, ‘so she did of me! She does of every one.’

‘She’ll make a convenience of America,’ said Isabel, smiling again and glad that her aunt’s questions were over.

It was not till the evening that she was able to see Ralph. He had been dozing all day; at least he had been lying unconscious. The doctor was there, but after a while went away—the local doctor, who had attended his father and whom Ralph liked. He came three or four times a day; he was deeply interested in his patient. Ralph had had Sir Matthew Hope, but he had got tired of this celebrated man, to whom he had asked his mother to send word he was now dead and was therefore without further need of medical advice. Mrs Touchett had simply written to Sir Matthew that her son disliked him. On the day of Isabel’s arrival Ralph gave no sign, as I have related, for many hours; but toward evening he raised himself and said he knew that she had come. How he knew was not apparent, inasmuch as for fear of exciting him no one had offered the information. Isabel came in and sat by his bed in the dim light; there was only a shaded candle in a corner of the room. She told the nurse she might go—she herself would sit with him for the rest of the evening. He had opened his eyes and recognised her, and had moved his hand, which lay helpless beside him, so that she might take it. But he was unable to speak; he closed his eyes again and remained perfectly still, only keeping her hand in his own. She sat with him a long time—till the nurse came back; but he gave no further sign. He might have passed away while she looked at him; he was already the figure and pattern of death. She had thought him far gone in Rome, and this was worse; there was but one change possible now. There was a strange tranquillity in his face; it was as still as the lid of a box. With this he was a mere lattice of bones; when he opened his eyes to greet her it was as if she were looking into immeasurable space. It was not till midnight that the nurse came back; but the hours, to Isabel, had not seemed long; it was exactly what she had come for. If she had come simply to wait she found ample occasion, for he lay three days in a kind of grateful silence. He recognised her and at moments seemed to wish to speak; but he found no voice. Then he closed his eyes again, as if he too were waiting for something—for something that certainly would come. He was so absolutely quiet that it seemed to her what was coming had already arrived; and yet she never lost the sense that they were still together. But they were not always together; there were other hours that she passed in wandering through the empty house and listening for a voice that was not poor Ralph’s. She had a constant fear; she thought it possible her husband would write to her. But he remained silent, and she only got a letter from Florence and from the Countess Gemini. Ralph, however, spoke at last—on the evening of the third day.

‘I feel better to-night,’ he murmured, abruptly, in the soundless dimness of her vigil; ‘I think I can say something.’ She sank upon her knees beside his pillow; took his thin hand in her own; begged him not to make an effort—not to tire himself. His face was of necessity serious—it was incapable of the muscular play of a smile; but its owner apparently had not lost a perception of incongruities. ‘What does it matter if I’m tired when I’ve all eternity to rest? There’s no harm in making an effort when it’s the very last of all.

Don't people always feel better just before the end? I've often heard of that; it's what I was waiting for. Ever since you've been here I thought it would come. I tried two or three times; I was afraid you'd get tired of sitting there.' He spoke slowly, with painful breaks and long pauses; his voice seemed to come from a distance. When he ceased he lay with his face turned to Isabel and his large unwinking eyes open into her own. 'It was very good of you to come,' he went on. 'I thought you would; but I wasn't sure.'

'I was not sure either till I came,' said Isabel.

'You've been like an angel beside my bed. You know they talk about the angel of death. It's the most beautiful of all. You've been like that; as if you were waiting for me.'

'I was not waiting for your death; I was waiting for—for this. This is not death, dear Ralph.'

'Not for you—no. There's nothing makes us feel so much alive as to see others die. That's the sensation of life—the sense that we remain. I've had it—even I. But now I'm of no use but to give it to others. With me it's all over.' And then he paused. Isabel bowed her head further, till it rested on the two hands that were clasped upon his own. She couldn't see him now; but his far-away voice was close to her ear. 'Isabel,' he went on suddenly, 'I wish it were over for you.' She answered nothing; she had burst into sobs; she remained so, with her buried face. He lay silent, listening to her sobs; at last he gave a long groan. 'Ah, what is it you have done for me?'

'What is it you did for me?' she cried, her now extreme agitation half smothered by her attitude. She had lost all her shame, all wish to hide things. Now he must know; she wished him to know, for it brought them supremely together, and he was beyond the reach of pain. 'You did something once—you know it. O Ralph, you've been everything! What have I done for you—what can I do to-day? I would die if you could live. But I don't wish you to live; I would die myself, not to lose you.' Her voice was as broken as his own and full of tears and anguish.

'You won't lose me—you'll keep me. Keep me in your heart; I shall be nearer to you than I've ever been. Dear Isabel, life is better; for in life there's love. Death is good—but there's no love.'

'I never thanked you—I never spoke—I never was what I should be!' Isabel went on. She felt a passionate need to cry out and accuse herself, to let her sorrow possess her. All her troubles, for the moment, became single and melted together into this present pain. 'What must you have thought of me? Yet how could I know? I never knew, and I only know to-day because there are people less stupid than I.'

'Don't mind people,' said Ralph. 'I think I'm glad to leave people.'

She raised her head and her clasped hands; she seemed for a moment to pray to him. 'Is it true—is it true?' she asked.

'True that you've been stupid? Oh no,' said Ralph with a sensible intention of wit.

'That you made me rich—that all I have is yours?'

He turned away his head, and for some time said nothing. Then at last: 'Ah, don't speak of that—that was not happy.' Slowly he moved his face toward her again, and they once more saw each other. 'But for that—but for that—!' And he paused. 'I believe I ruined you,' he wailed.

She was full of the sense that he was beyond the reach of pain; he seemed already so little of this world. But even if she had not had it she would still have spoken, for nothing mattered now but the only knowledge that was not pure anguish—the knowledge that they were looking at the truth together. 'He married me for the money,' she said. She wished to say everything; she was afraid he might die before she had done so.

He gazed at her a little, and for the first time his fixed eyes lowered their lids. But he raised them in a moment, and then, 'He was greatly in love with you,' he answered.

'Yes, he was in love with me. But he wouldn't have married me if I had been poor. I don't hurt you in saying that. How can I? I only want you to understand. I always tried to keep you from understanding; but that's all over.'

'I always understood,' said Ralph.

'I thought you did, and I didn't like it. But now I like it.'

'You don't hurt me—you make me very happy.' And as Ralph said this there was an extraordinary gladness in his voice. She bent her head again, and pressed her lips to the back of his hand. 'I always understood,' he continued, 'though it was so strange—so pitiful. You wanted to look at life for yourself—but you were not allowed; you were punished for your wish. You were ground in the very mill of the conventional!'

'Oh yes, I've been punished,' Isabel sobbed.

He listened to her a little, and then continued: 'Was he very bad about your coming?'

‘He made it very hard for me. But I don’t care.’

‘It is all over then between you?’

‘Oh no; I don’t think anything’s over.’

‘Are you going back to him?’ Ralph gasped.

‘I don’t know—I can’t tell. I shall stay here as long as I may. I don’t want to think—I needn’t think. I don’t care for anything but you, and that’s enough for the present. It will last a little yet. Here on my knees, with you dying in my arms, I’m happier than I have been for a long time. And I want you to be happy—not to think of anything sad; only to feel that I’m near you and I love you. Why should there be pain? In such hours as this what have we to do with pain? That’s not the deepest thing; there’s something deeper.’

Ralph evidently found from moment to moment greater difficulty in speaking; he had to wait longer to collect himself. At first he appeared to make no response to these last words; he let a long time elapse. Then he murmured simply: ‘You must stay here.’

‘I should like to stay—as long as seems right.’

‘As seems right—as seems right?’ He repeated her words. ‘Yes, you think a great deal about that.’

‘Of course one must. You’re very tired,’ said Isabel.

‘I’m very tired. You said just now that pain’s not the deepest thing. No—no. But it’s very deep. If I could stay—’

‘For me you’ll always be here,’ she softly interrupted. It was easy to interrupt him.

But he went on, after a moment: ‘It passes, after all; it’s passing now. But love remains. I don’t know why we should suffer so much.

Perhaps I shall find out. There are many things in life. You’re very young.’

‘I feel very old,’ said Isabel.

‘You’ll grow young again. That’s how I see you. I don’t believe—I don’t believe—’ But he stopped again; his strength failed him.

She begged him to be quiet now. ‘We needn’t speak to understand each other,’ she said.

‘I don’t believe that such a generous mistake as yours can hurt you for more than a little.’

‘Oh Ralph, I’m very happy now,’ she cried through her tears.

‘And remember this,’ he continued, ‘that if you’ve been hated you’ve also been loved. Ah but, Isabel—*adored!*’ he just audibly and lingeringly breathed.

‘Oh my brother!’ she cried with a movement of still deeper prostration.

LV

HE had told her, the first evening she ever spent at Gardencourt, that if she should live to suffer enough she might some day see the ghost with which the old house was duly provided. She apparently had fulfilled the necessary condition; for the next morning, in the cold, faint dawn, she knew that a spirit was standing by her bed. She had lain down without undressing, it being her belief that Ralph would not outlast the night. She had no inclination to sleep; she was waiting, and such waiting was wakeful. But she closed her eyes; she believed that as the night wore on she should hear a knock at her door. She heard no knock, but at the time the darkness began vaguely to grow grey she started up from her pillow as abruptly as if she had received a summons. It seemed to her for an instant that he was standing there—a vague, hovering figure in the vagueness of the room. She stared a moment; she saw his white face—his kind eyes; then she saw there was nothing.* She was not afraid; she was only sure. She quitted the place and in her certainty passed through dark corridors and down a flight of oaken steps that shone in the vague light of a hall-window. Outside Ralph's door she stopped a moment, listening, but she seemed to hear only the hush that filled it. She opened the door with a hand as gentle as if she were lifting a veil from the face of the dead, and saw Mrs Touchett sitting motionless and upright beside the couch of her son, with one of his hands in her own. The doctor was on the other side, with poor Ralph's further wrist resting in his professional fingers. The two nurses were at the foot between them. Mrs Touchett took no notice of Isabel, but the doctor looked at her very hard; then he gently placed Ralph's hand in a proper position, close beside him. The nurse looked at her very hard too, and no one said a word; but Isabel only looked at what she had come to see. It was fairer than Ralph had ever been in life, and there was a strange resemblance to the face of his father, which, six years before, she had seen lying on the same pillow. She went to her aunt and put her arm around her; and Mrs Touchett, who as a general thing neither invited nor enjoyed caresses, submitted for a moment to this one, rising, as might be, to take it. But she was stiff and dry-eyed; her acute white face was terrible.

'Dear Aunt Lydia,' Isabel murmured.

'Go and thank God you've no child,' said Mrs Touchett, disengaging herself.

Three days after this a considerable number of people found time, at the height of the London 'season,' to take a morning train down to a quiet station in Berkshire and spend half an hour in a small grey church which stood within an easy walk. It was in the green burialplace of this edifice that Mrs Touchett consigned her son to earth. She stood herself at the edge of the grave, and Isabel stood beside her; the sexton himself had not a more practical interest in the scene than Mrs Touchett. It was a solemn occasion, but neither a harsh nor a heavy one; there was a certain geniality in the appearance of things. The weather had changed to fair; the day, one of the last of the treacherous May-time, was warm and windless, and the air had the brightness of the hawthorn and the blackbird. If it was sad to think of poor Touchett, it was not too sad, since death, for him, had had no violence. He had been dying so long; he was so ready; everything had been so expected and prepared. There were tears in Isabel's eyes, but they were not tears that blinded. She looked through them at the beauty of the day, the splendour of nature, the sweetness of the old English churchyard, the bowed heads of good friends. Lord Warburton was there, and a group of gentlemen all unknown to her, several of whom, as she afterwards learned, were connected with the bank; and there were others whom she knew. Miss Stackpole was among the first, with honest Mr Bantling beside her; and Caspar Goodwood, lifting his head higher than the rest—bowing it rather less. During much of the time Isabel was conscious of Mr Goodwood's gaze; he looked at her somewhat harder than he usually looked in public, while the others had fixed their eyes upon the churchyard turf. But she never let him see that she saw him; she thought of him only to wonder that he was still in England. She found she had taken for granted that after accompanying Ralph to Gardencourt he had gone away; she remembered how little it was a country that pleased him. He was there, however, very distinctly there; and something in his attitude seemed to say that he was there with a complex intention. She wouldn't meet his eyes, though there was doubtless sympathy in them; he made her rather uneasy. With the dispersal of the little group he disappeared, and the only person who came to speak to her—though several spoke to Mrs Touchett—was Henrietta Stackpole. Henrietta had been crying.

Ralph had said to Isabel that he hoped she would remain at Gardencourt, and she made no immediate motion to leave the place. She said to herself that it was but common charity to stay a little with her aunt. It was fortunate she had so good a formula; otherwise she might have been greatly in want of one.

Her errand was over; she had done what she had left her husband to do. She had a husband in a foreign city, counting the hours of her absence; in such a case one needed an excellent motive. He was not one of the best husbands, but that didn't alter the case. Certain obligations were involved in the very fact of marriage, and were quite independent of the quantity of enjoyment extracted from it. Isabel thought of her husband as little as might be; but now that she was at a distance, beyond its spell, she thought with a kind of spiritual shudder of Rome. There was a penetrating chill in the image, and she drew back into the deepest shade of Gardencourt. She lived from day to day, postponing, closing her eyes, trying not to think. She knew she must decide, but she decided nothing; her coming itself had not been a decision. On that occasion she had simply started. Osmond gave no sound and now evidently would give none; he would leave it all to her. From Pansy she heard nothing, but that was very simple: her father had told her not to write.

Mrs Touchett accepted Isabel's company, but offered her no assistance; she appeared to be absorbed in considering, without enthusiasm but with perfect lucidity, the new conveniences of her own situation. Mrs Touchett was not an optimist, but even from painful occurrences she managed to extract a certain utility. This consisted in the reflexion that, after all, such things happened to other people and not to herself. Death was disagreeable, but in this case it was her son's death, not her own; she had never flattered herself that her own would be disagreeable to any one but Mrs Touchett. She was better off than poor Ralph, who had left all the commodities of life behind him, and indeed all the security; since the worst of dying was, to Mrs Touchett's mind, that it exposed one to be taken advantage of. For herself she was on the spot; there was nothing so good as that. She made known to Isabel very punctually—it was the evening her son was buried—several of Ralph's testamentary arrangements. He had told her everything, had consulted her about everything. He left her no money; of course she had no need of money. He left her the furniture of Gardencourt, exclusive of the pictures and books and the use of the place for a year; after which it was to be sold. The money produced by the sale was to constitute an endowment for a hospital for poor persons suffering from the malady of which he died; and of this portion of the will Lord Warburton was appointed executor. The rest of his property, which was to be withdrawn from the bank, was disposed of in various bequests, several of them to those cousins in Vermont to whom his father had already been so bountiful. Then there were a number of small legacies.

'Some of them are extremely peculiar,' said Mrs Touchett; 'he has left considerable sums to persons I never heard of. He gave me a list, and I asked then who some of them were, and he told me they were people who at various times had seemed to like him. Apparently he thought you didn't like him, for he hasn't left you a penny. It was his opinion that you had been handsomely treated by his father, which I'm bound to say I think you were—though I don't mean that I ever heard him complain of it. The pictures are to be dispersed; he has distributed them about, one by one, as little keepsakes. The most valuable of the collection goes to Lord Warburton. And what do you think he has done with his library? It sounds like a practical joke. He has left it to your friend Miss Stackpole—"in recognition of her services to literature." Does he mean her following him up from Rome? Was that a service to literature? It contains a great many rare and valuable books, and as she can't carry it about the world in her trunk he recommends her to sell it at auction. She will sell it of course at Christie's, and with the proceeds she'll set up a newspaper. Will that be a service to literature?'

This question Isabel forbore to answer, as it exceeded the little interrogatory to which she had deemed it necessary to submit on her arrival. Besides, she had never been less interested in literature than to-day, as she found when she occasionally took down from the shelf one of the rare and valuable volumes of which Mrs Touchett had spoken. She was quite unable to read; her attention had never been so little at her command. One afternoon, in the library, about a week after the ceremony in the churchyard, she was trying to fix it for an hour; but her eyes often wandered from the book in her hand to the open window, which looked down the long avenue. It was in this way that she saw a modest vehicle approach the door and perceived Lord Warburton sitting, in rather an uncomfortable attitude, in a corner of it. He had always had a high standard of courtesy, and it was therefore not remarkable, under the circumstances, that he should have taken the trouble to come down from London to call on Mrs Touchett. It was of course Mrs Touchett he had come to see, and not Mrs Osmond; and to prove to herself the validity of this thesis Isabel presently stepped out of the house and wandered away into the park. Since her arrival at Gardencourt she had been but little out of doors, the weather being unfavourable for visiting the grounds. This evening, however, was fine, and at first it struck her as a happy thought to have come out. The theory I have just mentioned was plausible enough, but it brought her little rest, and if you had seen her pacing about you would have said she had a bad conscience. She was not pacified when at the end of a quarter of an hour, finding herself in view of the house, she saw Mrs Touchett emerge from the portico accompanied by her visitor. Her aunt had evidently proposed to Lord Warburton that they should come

in search of her. She was in no humour for visitors and, if she had had a chance, would have drawn back behind one of the great trees. But she saw she had been seen and that nothing was left her but to advance. As the lawn at Gardencourt was a vast expanse this took some time; during which she observed that, as he walked beside his hostess, Lord Warburton kept his hands rather stiffly behind him and his eyes upon the ground. Both persons apparently were silent; but Mrs Touchett's thin little glance, as she directed it toward Isabel, had even at a distance an expression. It seemed to say with cutting sharpness: 'Here's the eminently amenable nobleman you might have married!' When Lord Warburton lifted his own eyes, however, that was not what they said. They only said 'This is rather awkward, you know, and I depend upon you to help me.' He was very grave, very proper and, for the first time since Isabel had known him, greeted her without a smile. Even in his days of distress he had always begun with a smile. He looked extremely self-conscious.

'Lord Warburton has been so good as to come out to see me,' said Mrs Touchett. 'He tells me he didn't know you were still here. I know he's an old friend of yours, and as I was told you were not in the house I brought him out to see for himself.'

'Oh, I saw there was a good train at 6.40, that would get me back in time for dinner,' Mrs Touchett's companion rather irrelevantly explained. 'I'm so glad to find you've not gone.'

'I'm not here for long, you know,' Isabel said with a certain eagerness.

'I suppose not; but I hope it's for some weeks. You came to England sooner than—a—than you thought?'

'Yes, I came very suddenly.'

Mrs Touchett turned away as if she was looking at the condition of the grounds, which indeed was not what it should be, while Lord Warburton hesitated a little. Isabel fancied he had been on the point of asking about her husband—rather confusedly—and then had checked himself. He continued immitigably grave, either because he thought it becoming in a place over which death had just passed, or for more personal reasons. If he was conscious of personal reasons it was very fortunate that he had the cover of the former motive; he could make the most of that. Isabel thought of all this. It was not that his face was sad, for that was another matter; but it was strangely inexpressive.

'My sisters would have been so glad to come if they had known you were still here—if they had thought you would see them,' Lord Warburton went on. 'Do kindly let them see you before you leave England.'

'It would give me great pleasure; I have such a friendly recollection of them.'

'I don't know whether you would come to Lockleigh for a day or two? You know there's always that old promise.' And his lordship coloured a little as he made this suggestion, which gave his face a somewhat more familiar air. 'Perhaps I'm not right in saying that just now; of course you're not thinking of visiting. But I meant what would hardly be a visit. My sisters are to be at Lockleigh at Whitsuntide for five days; and if you could come then—as you say you're not to be very long in England—I would see that there should be literally no one else.'

Isabel wondered if not even the young lady he was to marry would be there with her mamma; but she did not express this idea. 'Thank you extremely,' she contented herself with saying; 'I'm afraid I hardly know about Whitsuntide.'

'But I have your promise—haven't I?—for some other time.'

There was an interrogation in this; but Isabel let it pass. She looked at her interlocutor a moment, and the result of her observation was that—as had happened before—she felt sorry for him. 'Take care you don't miss your train,' she said. And then she added: 'I wish you every happiness.'

He blushed again, more than before, and he looked at his watch. 'Ah yes, 6.40; I haven't much time, but I've a fly at the door. Thank you very much.' It was not apparent whether the thanks applied to her having reminded him of his train or to the more sentimental remark. 'Good-bye, Mrs Osmond; good-bye.' He shook hands with her, without meeting her eyes, and then he turned to Mrs Touchett, who had wandered back to them. With her his parting was equally brief; and in a moment the two ladies saw him move with long steps across the lawn.

'Are you very sure he's to be married?' Isabel asked of her aunt.

'I can't be surer than he; but he seems sure. I congratulated him, and he accepted it.'

'Ah,' said Isabel, 'I give it up!'—while her aunt returned to the house and to those avocations which the visitor had interrupted.

She gave it up, but she still thought of it—thought of it while she strolled again under the great oaks

whose shadows were long upon the acres of turf. At the end of a few minutes she found herself near a rustic bench, which, a moment after she had looked at it, struck her as an object recognised. It was not simply that she had seen it before, nor even that she had sat upon it; it was that on this spot something important had happened to her—that the place had an air of association. Then she remembered that she had been sitting there, six years before, when a servant brought her from the house the letter in which Caspar Goodwood informed her that he had followed her to Europe; and that when she had read the letter she looked up to hear Lord Warburton announcing that he should like to marry her. It was indeed an historical, an interesting, bench; she stood and looked at it as if it might have something to say to her. She wouldn't sit down on it now—she felt rather afraid of it. She only stood before it, and while she stood the past came back to her in one of those rushing waves of emotion by which persons of sensibility are visited at odd hours. The effect of this agitation was a sudden sense of being very tired, under the influence of which she overcame her scruples and sank into the rustic seat. I have said that she was restless and unable to occupy herself; and whether or no, if you had seen her there, you would have admired the justice of the former epithet, you would at least have allowed that at this moment she was the image of a victim of idleness. Her attitude had a singular absence of purpose; her hands, hanging at her sides, lost themselves in the folds of her black dress; her eyes gazed vaguely before her. There was nothing to recall her to the house; the two ladies, in their seclusion, dined early and had tea at an indefinite hour. How long she had sat in this position she could not have told you; but the twilight had grown thick when she became aware that she was not alone. She quickly straightened herself, glancing about, and then saw what had become of her solitude. She was sharing it with Caspar Goodwood, who stood looking at her, a few yards off, and whose footfall on the unresonant turf, as he came near, she had not heard. It occurred to her in the midst of this that it was just so Lord Warburton had surprised her of old.

She instantly rose, and as soon as Goodwood saw he was seen he started forward. She had had time only to rise when, with a motion that looked like violence, but felt like—she knew not what, he grasped her by the wrist and made her sink again into the seat. She closed her eyes; he had not hurt her; it was only a touch, which she had obeyed. But there was something in his face that she wished not to see. That was the way he had looked at her the other day in the churchyard; only at present it was worse. He said nothing at first; she only felt him close to her—beside her on the bench and pressingly turned to her. It almost seemed to her that no one had ever been so close to her as that. All this, however, took but an instant, at the end of which she had disengaged her wrist, turning her eyes upon her visitant. 'You've frightened me,' she said.

'I didn't mean to,' he answered, 'but if I did a little, no matter. I came from London a while ago by the train, but I couldn't come here directly. There was a man at the station who got ahead of me. He took a fly that was there, and I heard him give the order to drive here. I don't know who he was, but I didn't want to come with him; I wanted to see you alone. So I've been waiting and walking about. I've walked all over, and I was just coming to the house when I saw you here. There was a keeper, or some one, who met me; but that was all right, because I had made his acquaintance when I came here with your cousin. Is that gentleman gone? Are you really alone? I want to speak to you.' Goodwood spoke very fast; he was as excited as when they had parted in Rome. Isabel had hoped that condition would subside; and she shrank into herself as she perceived that, on the contrary, he had only let out sail. She had a new sensation; he had never produced it before; it was a feeling of danger. There was indeed something really formidable in his resolution. She gazed straight before her; he, with a hand on each knee, leaned forward, looking deeply into her face. The twilight seemed to darken round them. 'I want to speak to you,' he repeated; 'I've something particular to say. I don't want to trouble you—as I did the other day in Rome. That was of no use; it only distressed you. I couldn't help it; I knew I was wrong. But I'm not wrong now; please don't think I am,' he went on with his hard, deep voice melting a moment into entreaty. 'I came here to-day for a purpose. It's very different. It was vain for me to speak to you then; but now I can help you.'

She couldn't have told you whether it was because she was afraid, or because such a voice in the darkness seemed of necessity a boon; but she listened to him as she had never listened before; his words dropped deep into her soul. They produced a sort of stillness in all her being; and it was with an effort, in a moment, that she answered him. 'How can you help me?' she asked in a low tone, as if she were taking what he had said seriously enough to make the enquiry in confidence.

'By inducing you to trust me. Now I know—to-day I know. Do you remember what I asked you in Rome? Then I was quite in the dark. But to-day I know on good authority; everything's clear to me to-day. It was a good thing when you made me come away with your cousin. He was a good man, a fine man, one of the best; he told me how the case stands for you. He explained everything; he guessed my

sentiments. He was a member of your family and he left you—so long as you should be in England—to my care,' said Goodwood as if he were making a great point. 'Do you know what he said to me the last time I saw him—as he lay there where he died? He said: "Do everything you can for her; do everything she'll let you."'

Isabel suddenly got up. 'You had no business to talk about me!'

'Why not—why not, when we talked in that way?' he demanded, following her fast. 'And he was dying—when a man's dying it's different.' She checked the movement she had made to leave him; she was listening more than ever; it was true that he was not the same as that last time. That had been aimless, fruitless passion, but at present he had an idea, which she scented in all her being. 'But it doesn't matter!' he exclaimed, pressing her still harder, though now without touching a hem of her garment. 'If Touchett had never opened his mouth I should have known all the same. I had only to look at you at your cousin's funeral to see what's the matter with you. You can't deceive me any more; for God's sake be honest with a man who's so honest with you. You're the most unhappy of women, and your husband's the deadliest of fiends.'

She turned on him as if he had struck her. 'Are you mad?' she cried.

'I've never been so sane; I see the whole thing. Don't think it's necessary to defend him. But I won't say another word against him; I'll speak only of you,' Goodwood added quickly. 'How can you pretend you're not heart-broken? You don't know what to do—you don't know where to turn. It's too late to play a part; didn't you leave all that behind you in Rome? Touchett knew all about it, and I knew it too—what it would cost you to come here. It will have cost you your life? Say it will'—and he flared almost into anger: 'give me one word of truth! When I know such a horror as that, how can I keep myself from wishing to save you? What would you think of me if I should stand still and see you go back to your reward? "It's awful, what she'll have to pay for it!"—that's what Touchett said to me. I may tell you that, mayn't I? He was such a near relation!' cried Goodwood, making his queer grim point again. 'I'd sooner have been shot than let another man say those things to me; but he was different; he seemed to me to have the right. It was after he got home—when he saw he was dying, and when I saw it too. I understand all about it: you're afraid to go back. You're perfectly alone; you don't know where to turn. You can't turn anywhere; you know that perfectly. Now it is therefore that I want you to think of *me*.'

'To think of "you"?' Isabel said, standing before him in the dusk. The idea of which she had caught a glimpse a few moments before now loomed large. She threw back her head a little; she stared at it as if it had been a comet in the sky.

'You don't know where to turn. Turn straight to *me*. I want to persuade you to trust me,' Goodwood repeated. And then he paused with his shining eyes. 'Why should you go back—why should you go through that ghastly form?'

'To get away from *you*!' she answered. But this expressed only a little of what she felt. The rest was that she had never been loved before. She had believed it, but this was different; this was the hot wind of the desert, at the approach of which the others dropped dead, like mere sweet airs of the garden. It wrapped her about; it lifted her off her feet, while the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid and strange, forced open her set teeth.*

At first, in rejoinder to what she had said, it seemed to her that he would break out into greater violence. But after an instant he was perfectly quiet; he wished to prove he was sane, that he had reasoned it all out. 'I want to prevent that, and I think I may, if you'll only for once listen to me. It's too monstrous of you to think of sinking back into that misery, of going to open your mouth to that poisoned air. It's you that are out of your mind. Trust me as if I had the care of you. Why shouldn't we be happy—when it's here before us, when it's so easy? I'm yours for ever—for ever and ever. Here I stand; I'm as firm as a rock. What have you to care about? You've no children; that perhaps would be an obstacle. As it is you've nothing to consider. You must save what you can of your life; you mustn't lose it all simply because you've lost a part. It would be an insult to you to assume that you care for the look of the thing, for what people will say, for the bottomless idiocy of the world. We've nothing to do with all that; we're quite out of it; we look at things as they are. You took the great step in coming away; the next is nothing; it's the natural one. I swear, as I stand here, that a woman deliberately made to suffer is justified in anything in life—in going down into the streets if that will help her! I know how you suffer, and that's why I'm here. We can do absolutely as we please; to whom under the sun do we owe anything? What is it that holds us, what is it that has the smallest right to interfere in such a question as this? Such a question is between ourselves—and to say that is to settle it! Were we born to rot in our misery—were we born to be afraid? I never knew *you* afraid! If you'll only trust me, how little you will be disappointed! The world's all before us—and the world's very big. I know something about that.'

Isabel gave a long murmur, like a creature in pain; it was as if he were pressing something that hurt her. ‘The world’s very small,’ she said at random; she had an immense desire to appear to resist. She said it at random, to hear herself say something; but it was not what she meant. The world, in truth, had never seemed so large; it seemed to open out, all round her, to take the form of a mighty sea, where she floated in fathomless waters. She had wanted help, and here was help; it had come in a rushing torrent. I know not whether she believed everything he said; but she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying. This belief, for a moment, was a kind of rapture, in which she felt herself sink and sink. In the movement she seemed to beat with her feet, in order to catch herself, to feel something to rest on.

‘Ah, be mine as I’m yours!’ she heard her companion cry. He had suddenly given up argument, and his voice seemed to come, harsh and terrible, through a confusion of vaguer sounds.

This however, of course, was but a subjective fact, as the metaphysicians say; the confusion, the noise of waters, all the rest of it, were in her own swimming head. In an instant she became aware of this. ‘Do me the greatest kindness of all,’ she panted. ‘I beseech you to go away!’

‘Ah, don’t say that. Don’t kill me!’ he cried.

She clasped her hands; her eyes were streaming with tears. ‘As you love me, as you pity me, leave me alone!’

He glared at her a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her own lips. His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession. So had she heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free.* She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot. There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinarily short time—for the distance was considerable—she had moved through the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door. Here only she paused. She looked all about her; she listened a little; then she put her hand on the latch. She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path.*

Two days afterwards Caspar Goodwood knocked at the door of the house in Wimpole Street in which Henrietta Stackpole occupied furnished lodgings. He had hardly removed his hand from the knocker when the door was opened and Miss Stackpole herself stood before him. She had on her hat and jacket; she was on the point of going out. ‘Oh, good-morning,’ he said, ‘I was in hopes I should find Mrs Osmond.’

Henrietta kept him waiting a moment for her reply; but there was a good deal of expression about Miss Stackpole even when she was silent. ‘Pray what led you to suppose she was here?’

‘I went down to Gardencourt this morning, and the servant told me she had come to London. He believed she was to come to you.’

Again Miss Stackpole held him—with an intention of perfect kindness—in suspense. ‘She came here yesterday, and spent the night. But this morning she started for Rome.’

Caspar Goodwood was not looking at her; his eyes were fastened on the doorstep. ‘Oh, she started—?’ he stammered. And without finishing his phrase or looking up he stiffly averted himself. But he couldn’t otherwise move.

Henrietta had come out, closing the door behind her, and now she put out her hand and grasped his arm. ‘Look here, Mr Goodwood,’ she said; ‘just you wait!’

On which he looked up at her*—but only to guess, from her face, with a revulsion, that she simply meant he was young. She stood shining at him with that cheap comfort, and it added, on the spot, thirty years to his life. She walked him away with her, however, as if she had given him now the key to patience.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

A number of these notes indicate differences between the first edition (FE) in 1881 and the changes Henry James made to the New York Edition (NYE), published in 1908. HJ made many hundreds of changes, often just minor adjustments. Comment here has been restricted only to those which substantially amplify or alter textual sense.

San Zaccaria: this is some way away from the fashionable parts of Venice, in the industrial area of the Castello, but the church contains masterpieces by Bellini, Tintoretto, and Tiepolo.

Ivan Turgenieff: Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev (1818–83) was a Russian writer of intense psychological portraits, and a major influence on Henry James, who first met him in Paris in 1875.

disponibles: available.

que cela manque souvent d'architecture: that it often lacks structure.

Il en serait bien embarrassé: He would find it very awkward.

image en disponsibilité: free-floating image.

a wary dealer: this extended conceit is typical of HJ's late style, but also interestingly places him in complicity with the obsessive collectors of the novel, Gilbert Osmond and Ned Rosier.

'In these frail vessels . . . affection': the slight misquote is from George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, which shares many plot parallels with *Portrait*. Eliot's exact phrase was 'In these delicate vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection.'

task unattempted: the trajectory from Walter Scott to Robert Louis Stevenson sketches out a romance form very different from the Realist novels of George Eliot.

ficelle: the 1877 Littré dictionary suggests this is a term for a weak or defective horse. These characters, HJ implies, are too weak to pull the coach and can only run alongside it.

physiognomy: the repetition of the term in this paragraph equates the house with its owner, an early indication that HJ will load descriptions of houses in the novel with symbolic import.

American girls: the American Girl was becoming a definable social type, partly the invention of fiction, including HJ's first major success, *Daisy Miller* (1878). She was defined as outspoken, impatient of social conventions, intelligent and energetic, but sometimes vulgarly self-serving. In an essay called 'The American Heroine', published in 1875, Agnes Macdonnell wrote: 'She is not bone of our bone; she has passed from among us; she has emigrated to new spheres; and we examine her with wonder and admiration mixed with some little amusement. She is possibly the representative of a future era in fiction, and we are perhaps destined to see the day when we shall meet her in the pages of English novels.'

thought her grandmother's home romantic: FE reads: 'dwelling picturesque'. Subtle changes emphasize Isabel's tendency to indulge her imagination: like Gustave Flaubert's heroine Emma Bovary, Isabel's experience is largely constructed through books.

But her aunt . . . interesting: FE reads: 'But her aunt infused a new vividness into the idea, and gave her so many fresh impressions that it seemed to her she had over-estimated the charms of conformity.'

bonne: maid.

three times across the Atlantic: these details echo the early, shiftless life of the James family in Europe, as

Henry James Sr pursued his own educational theories with his children in London, Paris, Geneva, and elsewhere.

Gounod . . . Browning . . . Eliot: all of these are additions to the NYE, which tends to mark out aesthetic taste with much more precision. Charles Gounod (1818–93), French composer, trained in Italy, most famed for his opera *Faust* (1859). The writers Robert Browning (1812–89) and George Eliot (1819–80) were central influences on HJ, and *Portrait* is clearly indebted to Browning's 'My Last Duchess' and Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) and her last book *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

He wintered abroad: consumptives were often recommended to avoid the damp English winters by travelling either to the clean air of the Swiss Alps or the dry heat of the Riviera, where clinics and spas treated many Europeans. Robert Louis Stevenson explored this world in his early piece 'Ordered South', an essay that established him as one of the late Victorian models of the delicate, tubercular artist.

He had only . . . riot of expression: FE reads: 'Ralph had forbidden himself the arts of demonstration. But conscious observation of a lovely woman had struck him as the finest entertainment that the world now had to offer him.'

Hottentot: racial term applied to Khoisanid race in south-west Africa by European travellers from the seventeenth century. Within a century it was generalized to mean 'a person of inferior intellect or culture; one degraded in the scale of civilisation' (*OED*).

calling her 'Columbia': Columbia was adopted as the goddess of liberty in the American Republic.

Titian: Tiziano Vecelli (mid-late 1480s–1576), painter of Venetian school, and a key figure in the Renaissance transformation of traditional painting.

phaeton: a four-wheeled open carriage (from Phaeton, Greek charioteer).

She found herself . . . a hero of romance: FE reads, less ambiguously: 'She thought him quite one of the most delectable persons she had met.'

no misprint: these metaphorical conceits are additions to NYE, and much more typical of HJ's 'late style'. They register HJ's deepening contempt for all that Henrietta represents about American modernity. HJ apologizes in the Preface for too much Henrietta in the novel, although she plays an important role in the overall design.

car-conductor: railway employee.

Constable: John Constable (1776–1837), English landscape painter. He received limited appreciation in his lifetime, but his reputation grew throughout the nineteenth century, until he was widely considered the quintessential English landscape painter.

Lancret: Nicholas Lancret (1690–1743), French painter, largely of courtly amusements. In FE, this painting was by Watteau, of considerably higher cultural and monetary value than his follower Lancret. Watteau was considered one of the defining artists shifting painting towards modern subjects.

tenue: deportment.

bêtise: folly.

There was . . . rising before her: FE reads: 'There was something too forcible, something oppressive and restrictive, in the manner in which he presented himself.' The NYE additions consistently emphasize Goodwood's overtly phallic assertion.

It pleased Isabel . . . his ripening youth: FE reads, more revealingly: 'He keenly regretted that the Civil War should have terminated just as he had grown old enough to wear shoulder-straps, and was sure that if something of the same kind would only occur again, he would make a display of striking military

talent.' This suggests Goodwood might be anxious to prove his masculinity; such doubts are erased from NYE.

Caliban . . . Ariel: The brute servant and the supernatural agent of the magician Prospero in William Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

Dickens . . . the Abbey . . . Goldsmith . . . Addison: the Americans plot out a fairly conventional tourist itinerary. The London Baedeker recommends travelling through such literary haunts around Fleet Street (where Dr Johnson lived) as an essential London experience.

Duke's Head . . . my club: Ralph's suggestions are satirical. The Covent Garden area was notorious for prostitutes and considered unsuitable for respectable women. The 1911 Baedeker notes: 'The stranger is cautioned against going to any unrecommended house near Leicester Square, as there are several houses of doubtful reputation in this locality.' Many of the hotels, presumably like Ralph's club, were male-only establishments.

the Bohemian manner: 'bohemian' was a shorthand term for that fraction of the middle class that refused conformity and lived the life of the artist, defending their aesthetic liberty and defying bourgeois morals. The term was established by Henri Mürger's *Scenes of Bohemian Life* in the 1840s, and tended to be associated with risqué poets like Charles Baudelaire or Algernon Swinburne.

Piccadilly: the 1911 Baedeker reports that this street 'contains a number of aristocratic residences and fashionable clubs, while the streets diverging to the N. offer some of the most expensive lodgings in London'. HJ initially lived here on moving permanently to London; it was known for its bachelor establishments for gentlemen about town.

September: i.e., before the London's autumn social season had begun.

hint of the supernatural: a man alone, late at night, in his deserted family home haunted by the past brings to mind HJ's late ghost story, 'The Jolly Corner' (1908). Passing supernatural hints like these keep in mind the Gardencourt ghost.

that brighter palace of art: the Crystal Palace, built largely of glass, and removed to Sydenham after the 1851 Great Exhibition, when it had been located in Hyde Park. It is included in the 'Excursions from London' section of the Baedeker, which comments that 'half-a–day may be agreeably spent there as a change from more serious sight-seeing'.

Lady Jane Grey: cousin to Edward VI, she was effectively forced to marry the Duke of Northumberland's son Guildford. The duke was behind proclaiming her queen after Edward VI's death and the marriage was a way for him to perpetuate his influence over the monarchy. Given the later machinations around Isabel's marriage, there is a clear parallel intended.

fête-champêtre: picnic.

Byron: Bantling reads only the most racy and notorious of the Romantic poets, valued in America presumably for his dedication to democratic struggles.

Jermyn Street: runs to the south of Piccadilly and one of the most fashionable streets of the time.

brown holland: linen covering. This conceit is a typical NYE addition.

Homer sometimes nods: i.e., even the best make mistakes. The origin of this saying is in Horace, *Ars Poetica*, l. 359. Horace suggests that 'whenever beauties in a poem form a majority, I shall not stumble at a few blemishes that are due to carelessness'.

Isabel . . . recognised Schubert . . . showed feeling: Franz Schubert (1797–1828) was lowly born, and remained an outsider in Vienna, with his last years blighted by illness. Parallels, therefore, will emerge with Madame Merle. FE reads: 'she recognized Beethoven—and she touched the piano softly and

discreetly but with evident skill. Her touch was that of an artist.' This is another instance of HJ changing cultural references to make more precise comment on character in NYE.

du bout des doigts: on the tips of the fingers.

Merle: French for blackbird. Idiomatically, *un fin merle* means a deep or cunning old bird.

a Juno or a Niobe: Greek references and common subjects for sculpture. Juno was the goddess of women and childbirth and jealous wife of Jupiter. Niobe was mother of seven sons and seven daughters killed by Apollo and Artemis, who wept for them until transformed into stone. These resonances alter in significance the more we know about Madame Merle.

better not marry their cousins: in many European countries, cousin marriage was illegal. It was allowed in England (Queen Victoria married her first cousin, after all), but there were anxious debates about it. Many felt that the practice caused inbreeding and degeneration of the race. In 1870 there had been parliamentary debates over the matter, since there was an attempt to include a question on the 1871 Census of population to try to gather the extent of the practice in England. This matter was given some theoretical framework by the researches of Charles Darwin, who had himself married his first cousin. The practice became far less widespread in the late Victorian period.

a tale unfold: 'I could a tale unfold whose lightest word | Would harrow up thy soul.' Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, i. v. 15.

your aunt imagines . . . no aberrations: FE reads: 'your aunt has no perception of spiritual things'.

carte blanche: a free hand.

je viens de loin: I go back a long way.

je vous demande un peu: I only ask you.

carrière: profession.

tout bêtement: quite simply.

Cartes sur table: To put my cards on the table.

cluster of appurtenances: cf. William James, 'The Consciousness of the Self', chapter 10 of *The Principles of Psychology* (1890): '*a man's Self* is the sum total of all that he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account'. James goes on to suggest that 'Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him*'.

nothing else expresses me: cf. Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay 'Self-Reliance': 'Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.' This is a central philosophical exchange in the book, which has great bearing on Isabel's belated understanding of her fate.

a parti: a good catch.

ignus fatuus: literally 'foolish fire', a will-o'–the-wisp.

the new Republic: the Third Republic was established after the Franco-Prussian War and the defeat of the Paris Commune in 1870.

ex-Lancer: former cavalryman, possibly more dashing than FE, which refers to Bantling as an ex-Guardsman.

Cimabue Madonna: Cimabue, or Benvenuto di Giuseppe (*c.*1240–1302), was a Florentine painter and mosaicist, the last great figure to work in the Byzantine style in medieval Italy. Dante considered him the greatest painter of his style, and one of his altarpieces is located in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence.

Louis Philippe: reigned from 1830 until the Revolution of 1848.

Café Anglais: in the 1881 Baedeker guide to *Paris and its Environs*, this is listed as 'principally a restaurant, expensive'.

Empire: the Empire of Napoleon III ran from 1852 to 1870. Mr Luce favours autocratic rule over the moves towards democracy typical of the reformist Third Republic. The 1881 Baedeker guide to Paris agrees: 'the municipal authorities have done their utmost to remove all traces of the Communist outrages'.

defended: Ned mistranslates *defenser*, to forbid, as to defend.

old china: this marks Ned out as an aesthete. It was extremely fashionable to collect china in 1870s, popularized in part by the painter James Whistler. In *Punch*, the aesthete was satirized by HJ's close friend, George du Maurier, in numerous cartoons. In one from October 1880, 'The Six-Mark Tea-Pot', the Aesthetic Bridegroom and his Intense Bride swoon over the pot: 'It is quite consummate, is it not?' 'It is indeed! Oh, Algernon, let us live up to it!'

Almanach de Gotha: a journal that details the royal and aristocratic families of Europe.

Hôtel Drouot: one of the central auction houses in Paris.

sans blague: no kidding.

je ne vous dis que ça!: that's all I'm saying!

Louis Quinze . . . Queen Anne: Rosier's taste for decorative arts elevates French Louis XV (1715–74) and Napoleonic First Empire (1804–14) style over English Queen Anne (1702–14).

salon: drawing room: the most public room of the house.

procédure: legal process.

groping celibates: considerably harsher than FE, which calls them 'harmless confederates'.

dame de compagnie: woman travelling companion.

quarter of the signorino: the young man's rooms.

It's never wrong to do that: Ralph's advice in this paragraph has a distinctly Paterian ring to it, as condensed into Walter Pater's infamous conclusion to *The Renaissance*, which exhorts the reader: 'To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits . . . While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment.'

a fine gold coin . . . struck off for a special occasion: the image-chain associated with Osmond that begins here is an NYE addition. Interestingly, it replaces the FE observation that 'he was one of those persons who, in the matter of race, may, as the phrase is, pass for anything'. Osmond's parentage is further discussed much later in the novel, see p. 446.

Ce n'est pas ma partie: It's not what I do.

ces dames: these ladies.

ma mère: mother.

gentille: nice.

Le couvent n'est pas comme le monde, monsieur: The convent is not the world, sir.

Le mondey gagnera: The world will gain.

là–bas: there.

Que Dieu vous garde, ma fille: God protect you, my girl.

Je vous salue, mesdames: I greet you, ladies (punning on *Je vous salue, Marie*, Hail Mary).

mignonne: poppet.

cicerone: tourist guide.

'En écus bien comptés?': 'In hard cash', echoing a line in Molière's famous play *The Miser* (1669).

Perugino . . . Saint Elizabeth: Isabel is visiting the Uffizi Gallery. The collection includes Pietro Perugino's *Madonna with Child and Saints* (1493), with St Sebastian standing on the right, and Mariotto Albertinelli's *Visitation* (1503), a meeting between Elizabeth and the Virgin Mary, centred on their grasped hands.

awake: NYE cuts the openly Gothic conclusion of this paragraph: 'At first it had struck her as a sort of prison; but very soon its prison-like quality became a merit, for she discovered that it contained other prisoners than the members of her aunt's household. The spirit of the past was shut up there, like a refugee from the outer world; it lurked in lonely corners, and, at night, haunted even the rooms in which Mrs Touchett diffused her matter-of–fact influence. Isabel used to hear vague echoes and strange reverberations; she had a sense of the hovering of unseen figures, of the flitting of ghosts. Often she paused, listening, half-startled, half-disappointed, on the great cold stone staircase.'

de confiance: with confidence.

Aristides: Athenian statesman of great probity who provoked some to exasperation and hopes of expulsion from the city at being so continually referred to as 'the Just'.

négociant: businessman.

the Countess Gemini revealed no depths: FE reads: 'the Countess presented no appearance of wickedness'.

Uffizi and the Pitti: the Uffizi is the most important Renaissance art collection in Florence; across the river, the Palazzo Pitti holds the art treasures gathered by the Medici family. They are connected by the 'Vasari Corridor', a walkway designed by the architect and art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–74).

bibelots: knick-knacks.

Medici: family that exercised great power in Florence: first as the dominant family during the fifteenth-century republics, then after 1530 as dukes of Florence, then after 1576 as grand dukes of Tuscany. They amassed wealth and art and presided over one of the greatest flowerings of art in the Western world.

Savonarola: Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), a religious leader who was briefly in power in Florence during the exile of the Medicis after 1494 and destroyed many humanist artworks in his notorious Bonfire of the Vanities. An enemy of the aristocracy and the papacy, he was tried and burnt at the stake in Florence in 1498.

Ghirlandaio: Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449–94) painted frescoes in Santa Trinità and Santa Maria Novella and a last supper in the Cenacolo of the Ognissanti, famous for their use of the faces of his

contemporaries.

à fond: in depth.

Machiavelli: Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), author and writer, notorious for his guide to political manipulation, *The Prince*. In *The Age of Despots*, the first volume of J. A. Symonds's *Renaissance in Italy* (1875), Machiavelli is referred to as 'the first in modern times to formulate a theory of government in which the interests of the ruler are alone regarded, which assumes a separation between statecraft and morality, which recognises force and fraud among the legitimate means of attaining high political ends, which makes success alone the test of conduct, and which presupposes the corruption, venality, and baseness of mankind at large'.

Colonna: Vittoria Colonna (1492–1547), religious poet, contemporary of Ariosto, Castiglione, and Michelangelo (who composed a famous sonnet on her death).

Metastasio: Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782), poet and librettist.

ciceroni: guides.

Correggio: Antonio Allegri da Correggio (*c*.1494–1534), most important Renaissance painter in the Parma school, with a major influence over the Baroque style. His style is noted for its soft lines and chiaroscuro effects and dramatic foreshortening in his frescoes and ceilings. He remained the most copied painter for artists travelling to Italy long into the nineteenth century.

Longhi . . . Goya: Pietro Longhi (1701–85), Venetian painter, famed for a turn from mythological and religious subjects towards a representation of everyday life. A Longhi was in the collection of Daniel and Ariana Curtis in the Palazzo Barbaro on the Grand Canal in Venice, where HJ often stayed in the 1880s and 1890s. Francisco José de Goya (1746–1828), Spanish painter. Both of these references to painters are added in NYE.

toilette: dress.

Mrs Touchett had from far back . . . imposed himself: FE reads, more plainly: 'Mrs Touchett had always liked Mr Osmond; she thought him so much of a gentleman.'

jeune fille: young girl.

incommoding social circulation: FE instead forthrightly calls the Countess 'a kind of flighty reprobate'. This kind of circumlocution invites suggestions of sexual scandal.

American Corinne: Madame de Staël (1766–1817) published her novel *Corinne* in 1807, a central document of European romanticism. The novel features an idealized female poet who comes to represent the Italian struggle for independence, becoming a symbol of the nation. To nominate oneself the American Corinne would be a supreme act of self-confidence or possibly just self-delusion.

Tasso: Torquato Tasso (1544–95), key poet of the Renaissance, best known for his epic poem *Jerusalem Liberated* (1581). Helped establish the model of the poetic genius as misunderstood outsider.

malaria: malaria (Italian = 'bad air') was often associated with the swamps that lay beyond the city boundaries of Rome and travellers were advised to leave the city before the spring heat renewed the presence of the disease (mosquitoes were only finally proved to be the vehicle for transmission in 1898). In HJ's *Daisy Miller*, the lead character dies of Roman fever after a reckless night wandering through Rome.

Whyte-Melville: George John Whyte-Melville (1821–78), old Etonian and writer of light sporting novels. The NYE once again adds a specific cultural reference to place a character.

Niobe of Nations: Rome, as described by Lord Byron in *Childe Harold*, canto IV: 'The Niobe of Nations

there she stands, | Childless and crownless, in her voiceless woe'.

Murray: Isabel is likely reading *Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy*, the standard guidebook of the time for Rome and its environs.

long journey: Warburton has taken the route of the extended Grand Tour, which moved beyond Europe into Turkey and the Middle East.

Clapham Junction: the station in the southern suburbs of London where many railway lines converge.

seated sublime: FE: 'visible grandeur'. The change might be meant to recall Immanuel Kant's discussion of St Peter's in his famous 'Analytic of the Sublime' in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: 'The very same thing can also suffice to explain the bewilderment or sort of embarrassment that is said to seize the spectator on first entering St. Peter's in Rome. For here there is a feeling of the inadequacy of his imagination for presenting ideas of a whole, in which the imagination reaches its maximum and . . . is thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction.' The Murray handbook prepared tourists for this effect. Of the Dome it warned: 'Nothing can surpass the magnificence of its stupendous vault, resting on the 4 colossal piers; and no language can do justice to its sublime effect.'

'Does she like him?' . . . as they went: this last exchange is substantially modified in NYE and has been transformed into the typically elliptical style of suggestive dialogue common in HJ's late style. In FE, this exchange reads:

> 'Does she like him?'
> 'Yes, I think she does.'
> 'Is he a good fellow?'
> Ralph hesitated a moment. 'No, he's not,' he said, at last.
> 'Why then does she like him?' pursued Lord Warburton, with noble *naiveté*.
> 'Because she's a woman.'

XXVIII: this was the beginning of the second volume when first published.

My envy's not dangerous: this significant comment, and a further comparison with the Pope in the next lines, were added in NYE.

Dying Gladiator: also known as *The Dying Gaul*, this statue stands in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, the major art museum built on a design of Michelangelo. The 1881 Murray handbook to Rome quotes a description by the critic John Bell: 'It is a most tragical and touching representation, and no one can meditate upon it without the most melancholy feelings. Of all proofs this is the surest of the effect produced by art. . . . The forms of the Dying Gladiator are not ideal or exquisite, like the Apollo; it is all nature, all feeling.' Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860) opens in this gallery: 'It was that room . . . in the centre of which reclines the noble and most pathetic figure of the Dying Gladiator, just sinking into his death-swoon. Around the walls stand the Antinous, the Amazon, the Lycian Apollo, the Juno; all famous productions of antique sculpture, and still shining in the undiminished majesty and beauty of their ideal life, although the marble, that embodies them, is yellow with time, and perhaps corroded by the damp earth in which they lay buried for centuries.' HJ had recently completed his study of Hawthorne when writing *Portrait*.

the Antinous and the Faun: *The Antinous of the Capitol* and *The Faun of Praxiteles* stand around the *Dying Gladiator*. Again, the Murray handbook quotes the critic John Bell: 'In the Antinous the anatomist would look in vain to detect even the slightest mistake or misconception; yet such is the simplicity of the whole composition, so fine and undulating the forms, that a trifling error would appear as a gross fault.' The Faun is also declared 'the most beautiful' of all in Rome. Hawthorne ends his opening chapter of *The Marble Faun* by commenting that the Faun captures a great paradox: 'Neither man nor animal, and yet no monster, but a being in whom races meet, on friendly ground.'

Villa Borghese: in Murray, this is described as ‘one of the favourite resorts of the Roman people in summer, and the most convenient promenade for the upper classes and foreign residents at all seasons’. The villa housed an extensive collection of classical sculptures.

conditions attached . . . unnoticed fact of style: this metaphor of a museum drawing is added to NYE. It replaces the largest editorial excision that HJ made in the novel when revising it, cutting out two paragraphs reflecting on Gilbert Osmond’s rationale for marrying Isabel. FE reads:

> . . . conditions attached to success became so various and repulsive that the idea of making an effort gradually lost its charm. It was not dead, however; it only slept; it revived after he had made the acquaintance of Isabel Archer. Osmond had felt that any enterprise in which the chance of failure was at all considerable would never have an attraction for him; to fail would have been unspeakably odious, would have left an ineffaceable stain upon his life. Success was to seem in advance definitely certain—certain, that is, on this one condition, that the effort should be an agreeable one to make. That of exciting an interest on the part of Isabel Archer corresponded to this description, for the girl had pleased him from the first of his seeing her. We have seen that she thought him ‘fine’; and Gilbert Osmond returned the compliment. We have also seen (or heard) that he had a great dread of vulgarity, and on this score his mind was at rest with regard to our young lady. He was not afraid that she would disgust him or irritate him; he had no fear that she would even, in the more special sense of the word, displease him. If she was too eager, she could be taught to be less so; that was a fault which diminished with growing knowledge. She might defy him, she might anger him; this was another matter from displeasing him, and on the whole a less serious one. If a woman were ungraceful and common, her whole quality was vitiated, and one could take no precautions against that; one’s own delicacy would avail little. If, however, she were only wilful and high-tempered, the defect might be managed with comparative ease; for had one not a will of one’s own that one had been keeping for years in the best condition—as pure and keen as a sword protected by its sheath?
>
> Though I have tried to speak with extreme discretion, the reader may have gathered a suspicion that Gilbert Osmond was not untainted by selfishness. This is rather a coarse imputation to put upon a man of his refinement; and it behoves us at all times to remember the familiar proverb about those who live in glass houses. If Mr Osmond was more selfish than most of his fellows, the fact will still establish itself. Lest it should fail to do so, I must decline to commit myself to an accusation so gross; the more especially as several of the items of our story would seem to point the other way. It is well known that there are few indications of selfishness more conclusive (on the part of a gentleman at least) than the preference for a single life. Gilbert Osmond, after having tasted of matrimony, had spent a succession of years in the full enjoyment of recovered singleness. He was familiar with the simplicity of purpose, the lonely liberties, of bachelorhood. He had reached that period of life when it is supposed to be doubly difficult to renounce these liberties, endeared as they are by long association; and yet he was prepared to make the generous sacrifice. It would seem that this might fairly be set down to the credit of the noblest of our qualities—the faculty of self-devotion. Certain it is that Osmond’s desire to marry had been deep and distinct. It had not been notorious; he had not gone about asking people whether they knew a nice little girl with a little money. Money was an object; but this was not his manner of proceeding, and no one knew—or even greatly cared—whether he wished to marry or not. Madame Merle knew—that we have already perceived. It was not that he had told her; on the whole he would not have cared to tell her. But there were things of which she had no need to be told—things as to which she had a sort of creative intuition. She had recognised a truth that was none the less pertinent for being very subtle: the truth that there was something very imperfect in Osmond’s situation as it stood. He was a failure, of course; that was an old story; to Madame Merle’s perception he would always be a failure. But there were degrees of ineffectiveness, and there was no need of taking one of the highest. Success, for Gilbert Osmond, would be to make himself felt; that was the only success to which he could now pretend. It is not a kind of distinction that is officially recognised—unless indeed the operation be performed upon multitudes of men. Osmond’s line would be to impress himself not largely but deeply; a distinction of the most private sort. A single character might offer the whole measure of it; the clear and sensitive nature of a generous girl would make space for the record. The record of course would be complete if the young lady should have a fortune, and Madame Merle would have taken no pains to make Mr

> Osmond acquainted with Mrs Touchett's niece if Isabel had been as scantily dowered as when first she met her. He had waited all these years because he wanted only the best, and a portionless bride naturally would not have been the best. He had waited so long in vain that he finally almost lost his interest in the subject—not having kept it up by venturesome experiments. It had become improbable that the best was now to be had, and if he wished to make himself felt, there was soft and supple little Pansy, who would evidently respond to the slightest pressure. When at last the best did present itself Osmond recognised it like a gentleman. There was therefore no incongruity in his wishing to marry—it was his own idea of success as well as that which Madame Merle, with her old-time interest in his affairs, entertained for him. Let it not, however, be supposed that he was guilty of the error of believing that Isabel's character was of that passive sort which offers a free field for domination. He was sure that she would constantly act—act in the sense of enthusiastic concession.

Bellaggio: popular resort in northern Italy on the promontory that divides the branches of Lake Como. Famed for its stunning views of mountain and lake.

Ampère: Jean Jacques Ampère (1800–64), historian and philologist, son of the famous scientist. Isabel is probably reading one of the volumes of his *Roman History in Rome* (1861–4).

Japan: a key indication of Osmond's aestheticism: the cult of Japonisme decorative style was extremely fashionable in the 1870s.

slipping of a fine bolt . . . all come out: both startling metaphors in the paragraph—the slipping of the bolt and the bank vault—are additions in NYE.

'Ah, comme cela se trouve!': 'Ah, what a discovery!'

dot: dowry.

portone: doors.

whatever she chose: an echo of the last line of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as Adam and Eve leave Paradise: 'The world was all before them, where to choose | Their place of rest'.

Piccadilly: Euston Square is *not* a long way from Piccadilly geographically but might have been considered so morally, since Isabel would have had to cross terrain to the north of Oxford Street and down through Soho that would have been unsuitable for an unaccompanied gentlewoman.

éprouvée: tried and tested.

Terpsichore: muse of dance and lyric poetry.

Bernini: Giovanni Bernini (1598–1680), the greatest Baroque sculptor and architect in Italy, most famous for his additions to St Peter's and the statue *The Ecstasy of St Teresa* in the Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. Bernini was considered one of the last universal geniuses of the Renaissance.

yet afraid to strike: Alexander Pope, 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot' (1735), line 203. Reference added in NYE.

Pau . . . Upper Engadine . . . Saint Moritz: Pau was a famous resort in the French Pyrenees; Upper Engadine is in the Swiss Alps, where the St Moritz resort is located.

rococo: an eighteenth-century French decorative style, often highly elaborate and considered (to English taste) overwrought.

Louis Quatorze: highly collectible French decorative arts and furniture associated with the reign of Louis XIV (1634–1715).

belle-mère: stepmother.

faience: glazed earthenware pottery, less valuable than porcelain.

'Gardez-vous–en bien!': 'take care not to!'

piazzetta . . . Farnese Palace: small square near the sixteenth-century Roman palace, built under the guidance of Michelangelo. Murray judges that 'the architecture of this palace is beyond all doubt the finest in Rome'.

Caravaggio in the piano nobile: wall paintings on main floor by Carravaggio, adopted name of Michelangelo Merisi (1573–1610), a subversive and revolutionary painter, who painted in the slums of Rome for a decade before fleeing after killing a man in the city.

Roccanera: the name of this palazzo is already ominous: it has associations with darkness and being a fortress. This description carries a certain Gothic quality to it, a mode which broods increasingly over the novel from this point.

Limoges enamels: French city Limoges was renowned for decorative enamel paintings from the sixteenth century, which became highly collectible.

Capo di Monte: situated near Naples, Capodimonte was famed for its distinct porcelain and its royal palace, built between 1738 and 1839.

an Infanta of Velasquez: Diego de Velázquez (1599–1660) produced several paintings of the daughter of Philip IV of Spain.

jeune fille: young girl.

Sir Walter Scott: Scott (1771–1832). Novels were held to corrupt young women readers, but Rosier excludes Scott's historical romances from this judgement.

salottino: small room.

majolica: earthenware pottery with bright-coloured glazes. This is a modern, industrial form of pottery, and as such an object of Osmond's contempt.

King of the Goths: in FE: 'head of the Communists'.

in petto: to himself.

Scylla and Charybdis: in Greek mythology, Scylla was transformed into a monster that seized and devoured mariners that sailed near her cave that lay in the straits of Messina, between Sicily and the Italian mainland; Charybdis was a whirlpool nearby. In Homer, Odysseus has to steer between the two.

Proserpine: another Greek myth associated with Sicily. Proserpine was the daughter of Demeter, captured by Pluto, lord of the underworld, to be his queen. Her absence from the world results in winter.

vous m'en demandez trop!: you ask too much of me!

Pincian: hilltop district of Rome, associated with the aristocracy. Murray calls it 'the most beautiful and frequented promenade in Rome'.

détente: relaxation or easing of relations.

Je n'y peux rien, moi!: There's nothing I can do about it!

grist-tax, the pellagra: in 1868, a tax on the grinding of food severely affected the poor; *pellagra* is a

disease caused by nutritional deficiency (from *polle agra*, meaning 'rough skin').

made vibrations deep: in FE: 'opened the door to agitation'. This opens one of Isabel's most important reveries with a metaphor that emphasizes complex psychological interiority. The chapter develops a complex skein of architectural and spatial images, patterning opening and closure, darkness and light.

a Unitarian preacher: Unitarianism was a dissenting form of Protestantism that developed in the seventeenth century. It rejects the Holy Trinity, affirming the unity of God. An emphasis on the humanity of Jesus leads into a rejection of the innate fallenness of mankind. In America, Unitarianism was associated with liberal social and economic reform and a commitment to abolish slavery. Gilbert's love of tradition incorporates the Catholic hierarchy, utterly opposed to this more egalitarian Protestant tradition.

duenna: (Spanish) a chaperone, usually an older woman, for young girls.

cotillion . . . quadrille: a cotillion is a formation dance (derived from the French *cotillon* or petticoat); a quadrille is a square dance for four couples.

prétendant: suitor, also carrying sense of 'pretender to the throne'.

Rome . . . Eternal City . . . Florence . . . place like any other: Rome had only in 1870 taken over as the capital city of the unified Italy from Florence, whose political power then waned.

American Corinne: see note to p. 283, above.

the accent . . . 'Creole' ancestors: in FE: 'a kind of Southern accent'. 'Creole' has many meanings, all suggesting lowly origins, sometimes of mixed or doubtful race. It tends to apply to descendants of European settlers born and naturalized in the colonies. In England, it applied to whites born in the West Indies, although it could also be applied to the children of African slaves. In America, it often applied to descendants of French settlers in Louisiana. HJ had revised NYE to exclude a reference to Osmond being able to pass for many races (see note to p. 233, above); are we to presume that he hides shamefully poor origins or something more?

grand seigneur: lordly.

c'est bien gentil!: that's very kind!

the Lung' Arno . . . the Ponte Vecchio: Henrietta walks along the famous Lungarno Corsini, the promenade that runs alongside the river Arno, past the two central bridges in Florence, and towards the Uffizi Gallery.

Correggio of the Tribune: Correggio's *The Virgin Adoring the Christ Child* (1524–6) was placed in the elaborately decorated octagonal Tribune room in the Uffizi in 1617. The painting remains one of the best-loved works in the collection. Cecil Gould refers to 'the magnificent swagger of the Madonna's draperies' and amazement at 'the extraordinary complexity of the foreshortening of the Christ child and the interest in lighting' (*The Paintings of Correggio*, 1976). More alarmingly for Henrietta, HJ's contemporary J. A. Symonds in his 1877 study of the fine arts of the Italian Renaissance considered Correggio 'sensuous' and a 'lyrist of luxurious ecstasy'. Critical opinion has not always been so kind to Correggio, who was beginning to fall out of fashion: HJ again uses taste in painting as a comment on character.

Medicean Venus: it is apt they meet next to one of the most celebrated sculptures of the classical goddess of love to discuss Isabel. This Greek marble has been in the Uffizi since 1677, moved from the Villa Medici by Grand Duke Cosimo III. The official guidebook to the gallery refers to its 'disturbing beauty' and how it 'became the focus of unrestrained admiration' from the seventeenth century.

'How much . . . to make sure of him!': in FE: 'How you must wish to capture him!'

like . . . railway-stations: another metaphor added in NYE to emphasize Henrietta's modernity.

palace-cars: name for first-class carriages on American railroads, sometimes fitted out with easy chairs, couches, and tables.

soubrette: flirtatious maidservant, a conventionally comic role in the theatre.

á la bonne heure!: that's fine!

streak of perversity: in FE, 'his successful rival had a fantastic streak in his composition'. Whenever 'perversity' appears in *Portrait*, it is always a later addition. It suggests decadence, and only began to acquire sexual connotations in the 1890s.

Saint John Lateran . . . Campagna: The San Giovanni of the Lateran is one of the celebrated basilicas of Rome, and considered one of the founding churches of Western Christianity. Isabel's reflections on the Campagna area echo those of the art critic John Ruskin. 'Perhaps there is no more impressive scene on earth than the solitary extent of the Campagna of Rome under evening light,' Ruskin stated in *Modern Painters* in 1844. It was a place full of 'spectral wrecks of massy ruins . . . that melt into the darkness, like shadowy countless troops of funeral mourners, passing from a nation's grave'. HJ's own Ruskinian reflections on the Campagna opened his 1873 travel essay 'Roman Rides'.

'Eh moi donc!': 'what about me!'

I mean . . . howl like a wolf: sentence added in NYE.

precious object: recall Merle's early description of herself to Isabel as porcelain 'shockingly chipped and cracked' (p. 199).

vaguely wailed: this disturbing description replaces 'she murmured to herself' in FE.

Baths of Titus: site near the Colosseum, a network of rooms that contain some of the best-preserved ancient wall paintings in Rome. Many of the rooms remained buried or in the process of being excavated in the late nineteenth century; Countess Gemini is not especially prepared to suffer for her art.

Arnide: perhaps a contraction of Arno-side–i.e. Florence.

'En voilà, ma chère, une pose!': 'there you are, my dear, but what affectation!'

simpaticissimo: very likeable.

simpatico: likeable (the Countess evidently finds Rosier cuter than Ralph).

a woman should cleave . . . at the altar: the religious imagery is added in NYE; FE simply reads, 'a woman should abide with her husband'. HJ made many small revisions to this whole critical exchange between husband and wife.

and that was better: the remainder of this long speech is an addition to the NYE, one of the longest sustained passages to be added. All the details about Osmond's first wife and Madame Merle's marriage revealed by the Countess in this conversation are added to the NYE. HJ evidently felt able to provide more scandalous detail in 1906; the moral climate that prevailed in 1880 was long gone.

Ça me dépasse: It's beyond me.

poverina: poor little one.

cara mia: my dear.

Piazza Navona: one of the main squares in Rome, it houses the church Sant'Agnese in Agone, a church built on the site of the martyrdom of the teenage St Agnes. This inevitably recalls Pansy's fate.

Elle éclaire la maison: She lights up the house.

'Eh, bien, chère Madame, qu'en pensez-vous?': 'So, my dear, what do you think?'

Etruscan figures: Rome contained an Etruscan museum, dedicated to displays of terracotta monuments and sarcophagi, set up by Pope Gregory XVI. This detail was added in NYE.

beautiful blameless knight: an echo, perhaps, of Sir Galahad in the Grail myth, and an implicit contrast to the aggressive warrior imagery associated with Goodwood. HJ might have been thinking of the famous painting of Galahad by Sir Frederick Watts. Detail added in NYE.

Bonington: Richard Parkes Bonington (1801–28), English painter, trained in France, who exercised a major influence on painting in the nineteenth century and is considered one of the central figures in defining the sensibility of modern painting. He was a friend of the French painter Delacroix, and won a gold medal in the Paris Salon of 1824, where he was exhibited with John Constable. He is an apt figure for Ralph to collect: he died before 30 of tuberculosis.

then she saw there was nothing: in 1882, the Society for Psychical Research was founded and began to collect just such stories of visitations at the time of death. Rather than ghosts, they called them 'phantasms of the living', and theorized they were projections of psychic energy sent by the dying to their most beloved (psychologists now call them 'bereavement hallucinations'). William James was a very active member of the Society, although HJ was typically more hesitant about their findings and his fictional ghosts tend to hover permanently on the threshold between the literal and the metaphorical.

forced open her set teeth: this startling image was added to NYE, and the revisions throughout this last encounter all intensify the sense of Goodwood's assault on Isabel.

His kiss was like white lightning . . . she was free: This image is considerably extended and amplified in the NYE. FE reads only: 'His kiss was like a flash of lightning; when it was dark again she was free.'

straight path: cf. Hebrews 12: 13: 'And make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed.'

On which he looked up at her: these are the last words of FE, the remainder of the passage being added. HJ's additions may have been responding to the complaints of reviewers in the 1880s that Henrietta's proposal advocated immorality.

[1] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London, 1948), 126.

[2] The standard biography has long been Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1977). Of the newer biographies, Fred Kaplan, *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius* (London, 1992), and Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and His Art* (London, 1998), stand out.

[3] This crucial year in James's life is the subject of Peter Brooks, *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton, 2007).

[4] Henry James, *The American Scene*, cited as epigraph, Virginia C. Fowler, *Henry James's American Girl: The Embroidery on the Canvas* (Madison, 1984).

[5] H. Rider Haggard, 'About Fiction', *Contemporary Review* (Feb. 1887), 173.

[6] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and Practice of Fiction*, ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago, 1986), 169–70.

[7] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. iii, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Philip Davis (London, 1995), 44.

[8] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. A. Bantock (London, 1978), 56 and 60.

[9] Elizabeth Boyle Machlan, '"There are Plenty of Houses": Architecture and Genre in *The Portrait of a Lady*', *Studies in the Novel*, 37/4 (2005), 398.

[10] For discussion, see Linda Nochlin, *Realism: Style and Civilisation* (Harmondsworth, 1971); George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from* Frankenstein *to* Lady Chatterley (Chicago, 1981); Dennis Walder (ed.), *The Realist Novel* (London, 1995); and Matthew Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism* (Oxford, 2007).

[11] Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Princeton, 1983), pp. ix-x.

[12] Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', 172.

[13] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford, 1986), 152–3.

[14] Desmond McCarthy, cited in Peter Stansky, *On or About December 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 198–9.

[15] Ermath, *Realism and Consensus*, 257.

[16] R. H. Hutton, Review of *Portrait* collected in Roger Gard (ed.), *Henry James: Critical Heritage* (London, 1968), 93–4.

[17] J. Hillis Miller, *Literature as Conduct: Speech Acts in Henry James* (New York, 2005), 74.

[18] Anthony J. Mazzella, 'The New Isabel', in Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. Robert Bamberg (New York, 1995), 597.

[19] See e.g. Nina Baym, 'Revision and Thematic Change in *The Portrait of a Lady*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22/2 (1976). The New York revisions in general are discussed in David McWhirter (ed.), *Henry James's New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship* (Stanford, 1995).

[20] Henry James, Preface to 'The Reverberator', *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, ed. Richard P. Blackmur (New York, 1934), 193.

[21] Max Beerbohm, '1880', in *The Works of Max Beerbohm*, available in electronic form at www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext99/twomb10.txt.

[22] See Sarah Stambaugh, 'The Aesthetic Movement and *The Portrait of a Lady*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30/4 (1976). The description of Mrs Osmond on p. 446 below contains the strongest echo of Lady Wilde's public persona in London in 1879. The most sustained discussion of James's relationship to the Aesthetic Movement is Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, 1990).

[23] Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage and the Law in Victorian England 1850–1895* (London, 1989), 103.

[24] Trevor Creighton, *Ethics of Some Modern Novels* (London, 1884), 15.

[25] Donatella Izzo, '*The Portrait of a Lady* and Modern Narrative', in Joel Porte (ed.), *New Essays on* The Portrait of a Lady (Cambridge, 1990), 42.

[26] Henry James, 'John S. Sargent' (1887), reproduced in *Essays on Art and Drama* (Aldershot, 1996), 424 and 426.

[27] Ibid. 427.

[28] David M. Lubin, *Act of Portrayal: Eakins, Sargent, James* (New Haven, 1985), 3 and 8.

[29] *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (Oxford, 1987), 15.

[30] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago, 1987).

PENGUIN CLÁSICOS

HENRY JAMES

Retrato de una dama

Epílogo de PHILIP HORNE

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Traducción de
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PREFACIO*

Comencé *Retrato de una dama*, al igual que *Roderick Hudson*, en Florencia, en el transcurso de los tres meses que pasé allí en la primavera de 1879. Como en el caso de *Roderick* y de *El americano*, mi primera intención era que apareciese en *The Atlantic Monthly*, donde empezó a publicarse en 1880. A diferencia de sus dos predecesoras, sin embargo, encontró también otra salida, con periodicidad mensual, en *Macmillan's Magazine*, y resultó ser una de las últimas ocasiones en las que una novela mía se publicó por entregas simultáneamente en Inglaterra y Estados Unidos, puesto que hasta entonces las mudables relaciones literarias entre ambos países no habían alterado dicha costumbre. Es una novela larga, y me llevó largo tiempo escribirla. Recuerdo que estuve muy ocupado con ella de nuevo al año siguiente, durante una estancia de varias semanas en Venecia. Entonces me alojaba en Riva Schiavoni, en el piso superior de una casa próxima al pasaje que desemboca en San Zaccaria, y la vida de los canales, la maravillosa laguna que se extendía ante mí y el incesante parloteo de las gentes de Venecia llegaba a mis ventanas, por las que me parece haberme sentido constantemente atraído, presa de la infructuosa inquietud de la creación, como si en las aguas azules del canal fuese a ver aparecer de repente la nave de una idea acertada, de una frase mejor, del siguiente giro afortunado de la trama, de la siguiente pincelada auténtica de mi lienzo. Pero recuerdo con la nitidez suficiente que la respuesta más repetida que, por lo general, obtenían aquellos ruegos inquietos era la admonición un tanto lúgubre de que los lugares históricos y románticos, como los que abundan en tierras italianas, ofrecen al artista una dudosa ayuda para la concentración cuando no son ellos objeto de la misma. Su propia vida es demasiado rica y están ellos mismos demasiado repletos de significado para que uno pueda limitarse a ofrecerles cualquier frase manida. Hacen que uno olvide las cuestiones simples y se plantee, al igual que ellos, otras de mayor calado. Así que muy pronto, al tiempo que anhela su ayuda para resolver las dificultades, el escritor se siente como si estuviese pidiendo a un ejército de veteranos gloriosos que le ayuden a detener a un vendedor ambulante que le ha estafado con el cambio.

Hay páginas del libro que, al releerlas, me han hecho ver de nuevo la pronunciada curva de la ancha Riva, las grandes manchas de color de las casas balconadas y la repetida ondulación de los encorvados puentecillos, acentuada por la oleada de peatones, empequeñecidos por la distancia, que por ellos suben y bajan. Los pasos de Venecia y las voces de Venecia —pues allí toda palabra, no importa de dónde venga, tiene el mismo tono que una llamada desde el otro lado del agua— entran por la ventana una vez más y renuevan en mí aquella antigua sensación de tener repletos los sentidos y la mente dividida, frustrada. ¿Cómo es posible que unos lugares que avivan en general de tal forma la imaginación no le ofrezcan, en un momento determinado, la respuesta concreta que busca? Recuerdo haberme maravillado una y otra vez, en lugares hermosos, de este hecho. La pura verdad es, a mi entender, que lo que como respuesta a nuestro ruego dichos lugares expresan es en realidad demasiado… más de lo que, en un caso concreto, puede resultarnos útil; así que, después de todo, uno se descubre trabajando con menor coherencia con respecto al ambiente que lo rodea que en presencia de aquello moderado y neutro, sobre lo que siempre podemos arrojar parte de la luz de nuestra visión. Un lugar como Venecia está demasiado imbuido de orgullo para limosnas de ese tipo; Venecia no acepta préstamos, lo da todo con magnificencia. De ello obtenemos enormes beneficios, pero para hacerlo tenemos que estar o bien libres de cualquier obligación o bien a su entera disposición. De ese cariz, así de melancólicas, son mis reminiscencias; aunque, en general, es indudable que, a la larga, el libro y el «esfuerzo literario» se han visto mejorados gracias a ellas. Resulta curioso cuán fecundo resulta con frecuencia al final un momento de pérdida de atención. Depende de lo que la haya atraído, de en qué se haya dispersado. Hay fraudes insolentes y pretenciosos, y los hay astutos e insidiosos. Y hay siempre, me temo, hasta en el artista más artificioso, suficiente fe ciega, anhelos profundos suficientes para hacerlo vulnerable a dichos engaños.

Al tratar de recuperar aquí, para reconocerlo, el germen de mi idea, veo que no consistió en absoluto en el esbozo de un «argumento», palabra esta nefanda, ni tampoco en una ráfaga en la imaginación de una serie de relaciones, ni en ninguna de esas situaciones que, siguiendo una lógica propia, se ponen de inmediato, para el fabulador, en movimiento e inician una marcha o una carrera, un rumor de pasos rápidos; sino en la idea de un solo personaje, en el carácter y el aspecto de una joven de particular atractivo, al que había que añadirle todos esos elementos que por

lo general conforman una «trama», obviamente un escenario. Debo decir una vez más que tan interesante como la joven, en sus mejores momentos, me resulta esta proyección de la memoria en todo el desarrollo, en la imaginación propia, de un pretexto así como motivo. Aquí reside lo fascinante del arte del fabulador, en esas sombras acechantes de expansión, en esas necesidades de germinación seminal, en ese empeño maravilloso de la idea concebida de crecer tanto como le sea posible, de brotar a la luz y el aire y florecer allí en profusión; y, en igual medida, en esas posibilidades de recobrar, desde un buen punto de observación en el terreno conquistado, la historia íntima del asunto, de rastrear sus pasos y etapas, y reconstruirlos. Siempre recuerdo con placer un comentario que oí hace años salir de los labios de Iván Turguéniev con respecto a su propia experiencia en lo concerniente al origen habitual de la escena de ficción. Para él casi siempre se iniciaba con la imagen de una o más personas, que se proyectaba ante él y reclamaba su atención como figura activa o pasiva, despertando su interés y atrayéndolo solo por cómo eran y por lo que eran dichas personas. En ese sentido, él las veía *disponibles*, las veía sujetas al destino, a las complicaciones de la existencia, y las veía con total nitidez, pero entonces tenía que encontrarles las relaciones adecuadas, aquellas que mejor sirviesen para darles relevancia; debía imaginar, inventar, seleccionar y ensamblar las situaciones más útiles y favorables según la personalidad de las criaturas en sí, las complicaciones que con más probabilidad podrían causar y sufrir.

«Alcanzar esas cosas es alcanzar mi "historia" —decía—, y así es cómo yo la busco. El resultado es que con frecuencia se me acusa de no tener "historia" suficiente. A mí me parece que tengo toda la necesaria para mostrar a mis personajes, para exponer las relaciones que tienen entre sí, ya que ese es mi único rasero. Si observo a mis personajes el tiempo necesario, los veo juntarse, veo cómo se *sitúan*, los veo realizar una u otra acción y enfrentarse a una u otra dificultad. El aspecto que tienen, la manera en que se mueven, hablan y se comportan, siempre en el escenario que yo he creado para ellos, es mi relato, del que me atrevo a decir que, por desgracia, *cela manque souvent d'architecture*. Pero creo que prefiero que haya poca estructura a que haya demasiada si hay peligro de que interfiera con mi dimensión de la verdad. A los franceses, por supuesto, les gusta ver más estructura que la que yo ofrezco, teniendo como tienen por característica propia tanta facilidad para la misma; y es evidente que hay que ofrecer tanta como sea factible. En lo referente al origen de esas semillas que el viento arrastra hasta nosotros, ¿quién se atrevería a decir, en respuesta a su pregunta, de qué lugar proceden? Tenemos que remontarnos demasiado en el tiempo, tenemos que ir demasiado atrás para responder. ¿Se puede decir algo más aparte de que proceden de todos los rincones del cielo, de que se encuentran casi siempre en cada vuelta del camino? Las semillas se acumulan, y nosotros nos dedicamos siempre a recogerlas, a seleccionarlas. Son el aliento mismo de la vida, con lo que quiero decir que la vida, a su manera, nos las ofrece al respirar. De forma que, prescritas e impuestas, llegan hasta nuestra mente arrastradas por la corriente de la vida. Esto hace que resulte una estupidez la oposición del crítico, tan frecuente, al tema elegido, cuando carece de luces para darle su aprobación. ¿Indicará en tal caso qué otro tema habría sido el adecuado, puesto que su oficio consiste esencialmente en *indicar*? *Il en serait bien embarrassé*. Pues cuando indica lo que he hecho o dejado de hacer con él es otra cuestión, ahí está en su propio terreno. Y yo dejo mi "arquitectura" —concluyó mi distinguido amigo— a su entera disposición.»

Así se expresaba este fantástico genio, y recuerdo con agrado la gratitud que sentí cuando se refirió a la intensidad de sugestión que puede existir en la figura desplazada, el personaje desvinculado, la imagen *en disponibilité*. Me ofreció más garantías de las que hasta el momento había yo encontrado en ese bendito hábito de la imaginación propia, ese truco consistente en depositar en una persona real o inventada, en un par de ellas o en todo un grupo, la propiedad del germen y la autoridad sobre él. Yo, por mi parte, era mucho más consciente por adelantado de los personajes que del escenario; el interés excesivo y exageradamente prematuro en este último me parecía, en sí, como poner el carro antes que los bueyes. Podría envidiar, aunque no emular, al escritor imaginativo que tiene la virtud de concebir la historia en primer lugar e imaginar a los personajes después: hasta tal punto me resultaba difícil pensar en una historia que no necesitase de inmediato unos personajes para ponerla en marcha; en una situación que para tener interés no dependiese de la naturaleza de las personas en ella inmersas y, por lo tanto, en su manera de afrontarla. Existen métodos para lo que se conoce como presentación, según creo, entre novelistas que aparentemente prosperan, que presentan la situación como si fuesen indiferentes a dicho punto de apoyo; pero no he olvidado el valor que para mí tuvo en aquel momento el testimonio de ese escritor ruso tan admirable de que yo no tenía necesidad alguna, por pura superstición, de tratar de llevar a cabo ejercicios de esa naturaleza. Otros ecos de la misma fuente permanecen en mí, debo confesar, con igual intensidad, si es que no se trata en realidad de un único eco que todo lo inunda. Después de aquello era imposible, en interés propio, no advertir enorme lucidez en la

cuestión, atormentada, desfigurada y confusa del valor objetivo, e incluso en la apreciación crítica, del «tema» en la novela.

Yo había tenido desde muy pronto el instinto de dar su justa medida a esos valores y de ver así cómo quedaba reducida al absurdo la tediosa disputa sobre la moralidad y la «inmoralidad» del tema en la novela. Al reconocer con tanta prontitud la única medida del valor de un tema determinado, la cuestión con respecto al mismo que si se responde adecuadamente hace innecesaria cualquier otra —¿es válido, en una palabra, es auténtico, es sincero, es el resultado de una impresión o de una percepción directa de la vida?— había encontrado, en general, poco edificante una pretensión crítica que había prescindido desde el principio de toda delimitación del terreno, de toda definición de los términos. El aire de mis comienzos aparece en mi memoria enrarecido, todo él, por dicha vanidad, a no ser que la diferencia ahora radique únicamente en mi impaciencia final, en la pérdida de concentración. Creo que no existe verdad más nutritiva ni más sugerente a ese respecto que la de la dependencia perfecta del sentido «moral» de la obra de arte, de la cantidad de vida experimentada que ha sido necesaria para producirla. La cuestión retorna así, obviamente, a la clase y al grado de la sensibilidad inicial del artista, que es el terreno del que brota el tema. La calidad y la capacidad de dicho terreno, la propiedad de «cultivar» en él con la frescura y rectitud debidas cualquier visión de la vida, representa, con fuerza o débilmente, la moralidad proyectada. Dicho elemento no es sino otro nombre para la conexión más o menos estrecha que guarda el tema con algo impreso en la inteligencia, con alguna experiencia sincera. Con lo cual, al mismo tiempo, está claro, no quiero en modo alguno negar que ese aire de humanidad que rodea al artista —que proporciona el toque final al valor de la obra— sea un elemento susceptible de variar tanto y de forma tan sorprendente: en ocasiones un medio rico y generoso, y en otras mezquino y pobre en comparación. Aquí reside exactamente el alto precio de la novela como forma literaria, su capacidad no solo de, conservando la forma con cercanía, abarcar todas las diferencias de la relación individual con el tema general, todas las variedades de la visión de la vida, de la disposición para reflejar y proyectar, creada por unas condiciones que nunca son las mismas de un hombre a otro (ni tampoco, para el caso, de un hombre a una mujer), sino para aparecer de hecho más fiel a su personaje cuanto más pugna este con su molde o, con latente extravagancia, tiende a romperlo.

La casa de la ficción tiene en resumen no una, sino un millón de ventanas, o más bien un número inimaginable; cada una de ellas ha sido horadada, o es todavía susceptible de serlo, en la inmensa fachada, por la necesidad de la visión individual y por la presión de la voluntad del individuo. Estas aberturas, de diferentes formas y tamaños, cuelgan de tal modo, todas juntas, sobre la escena humana que habríamos esperado de ellas una mayor similitud de estilo de la que nos encontramos. No son más que ventanas en el mejor de los casos, simples agujeros en un muro ciego, inconexas, suspendidas en lo alto; no son puertas de goznes que se abran directamente a la vida. Sin embargo, cuentan con la característica propia de que tras cada una de ellas se alza una figura con un par de ojos, o al menos con unos gemelos, que las convierte, una y otra vez, en un instrumento de observación único que le asegura a la persona que lo usa una impresión distinta en cada caso. Él y sus vecinos contemplan el mismo espectáculo, pero uno ve más donde el otro ve menos, uno ve blanco donde el otro ve negro, uno ve grande lo que el otro ve pequeño. Y así sucesivamente, y así una y otra vez. Por fortuna, no se puede decir, con respecto a un par de ojos en concreto, a qué *no* se abrirá la ventana; «por fortuna» a causa, precisamente, de lo incalculable de su alcance. El campo abierto, la escena humana, es «el tema elegido»; la abertura horadada, ya sea ancha, con mirador o una tronera, es la «forma literaria»; pero ni juntas ni por separado son nada sin la presencia inmóvil del observador o, dicho de otro modo, sin la conciencia del artista. Díganme lo que es el artista y les diré de qué *ha sido* consciente. De ese modo les expresaré de inmediato su libertad sin límites y sus referentes «morales».

No obstante, todo esto no es sino un largo rodeo para hablar de mi primer paso borroso hacia *Retrato*, que consistió exactamente en el control de un único personaje, adquisición a la que, por otra parte, llegué de una manera que no voy a describir aquí. Baste con decir que, según me parecía, estaba en completa posesión de él, que lo había estado desde hacía largo tiempo, que esto me lo había hecho familiar sin por ello desdibujar su encanto, y que, con toda urgencia y con todo tormento, lo veía en movimiento y, por así decirlo, en tránsito. Esto equivale a decir que lo veía como doblegado a su destino, a uno u otro destino; a *cuál*, de entre todas las posibilidades, era precisamente la cuestión. Así, ya tenía a mi vívido individuo, vívido, extrañamente, a pesar de seguir en libertad, de no estar aún confinado por las circunstancias, de no estar ocupado en los enredos que buscamos para formarnos gran parte de esa impresión que constituye una identidad. Si la aparición aún no había ocupado su lugar, ¿cómo es que resultaba tan vívida?, ya que las incógnitas de los personajes, en su mayor parte, se despejan mediante el proceso de ubicación. No

hay duda de que podría responderse con precisión a la cuestión si fuésemos capaces de hacer algo tan sutil, si no tan monstruoso, como escribir la historia del desarrollo de la propia imaginación. En tal caso, uno describiría lo que, en un momento concreto, le había sucedido de extraordinario, y se estaría así, por ejemplo, en posición de describir, con la claridad en mente, cómo, en la situación propicia, la imaginación se había adueñado (sacándola directamente de la vida) de tal figura o forma tan definida y animada. En esa medida, la figura, como puede verse, ya *ha sido* situada: situada en la imaginación que la contiene, la conserva, la protege, que la disfruta, consciente de su presencia en la trastienda oscura, abarrotada y heterogénea de la mente, de igual manera que un cauto comerciante de preciosas bagatelas, en posición de hacer un «adelanto» sobre los objetos raros que se le confían, es consciente de la «pieza» singular que ha dejado en depósito la dama aristocrática y misteriosa en dificultades o el aficionado especulador, y que ya está allí lista para revelar de nuevo su valor en cuanto se haga girar la llave en la puerta del aparador.

Puede, lo reconozco, que la analogía resulte un tanto exagerada para el «valor» concreto al que me refiero: la imagen de esa joven naturaleza femenina que, de un modo tan curioso, había tenido a mi disposición desde hacía tanto tiempo; pero en mi cálida reminiscencia parece responder por completo a la realidad, junto con el recuerdo, además, de mi pío deseo de situar aquel tesoro mío en el lugar apropiado. En el recuerdo me veo como el comerciante resignado a no «obtener beneficios», resignado a guardar el preciado objeto bajo llave indefinidamente antes que depositarlo, no importa a qué precio, en manos vulgares. Porque sí *existen* comerciantes de estas formas, figuras y tesoros capaces de tal refinamiento. Lo importante, sin embargo, es que esta única piedra angular, la idea de cierta joven que se enfrenta a su destino, fue en un principio todo el material con el que contaba para levantar el enorme edificio de *Retrato de una dama*. Al final resultó ser una casa cuadrada y espaciosa, o así al menos me ha parecido a mí en esta nueva visita; pero, para llegar aquí, hubo que ir levantándola en torno a mi joven dama mientras ella se encontraba en absoluto aislamiento. Esta es, a mi modo de ver, la circunstancia interesante desde el punto de vista artístico; puesto que, debo confesar, una vez más me he dejado llevar por la curiosidad de analizar la estructura. ¿Mediante qué proceso de agregación lógica iba a encontrarse aquella «personalidad» apenas esbozada, la mera sombra tenue de una joven inteligente aunque presuntuosa, enriquecida con los elevados atributos que conforman un tema? Y, además, en el mejor de los casos, ¿con qué flaqueza no se vería viciado dicho tema? Millones de jóvenes presuntuosas, inteligentes o no, se enfrentan a diario a su destino, ¿y qué perspectivas de *ser* tiene su destino para que, como mucho, hagamos una historia de él? La novela es por su propia naturaleza una «agitación» [*ado*], una agitación a raíz de algo, y cuanto mayor sea la forma que adopte, mayor será, claro está, dicha agitación. Por lo tanto, eso era a lo que yo, conscientemente, me enfrentaba: a organizar de manera concluyente una historia sobre Isabel Archer.

Examiné con detenimiento aquella cuestión, me parece recordar, aquella extravagancia; y la consecuencia fue precisamente reconocer el encanto del problema planteado. Aborden un problema así con un mínimo de inteligencia, y descubrirán de inmediato cuánta sustancia hay en él; lo que de verdad sorprende es comprobar, mientras examinamos el mundo, con qué seguridad, con qué desmesura, las Isabeles Archer, e incluso otras mujeres de mucha menos categoría, insisten en que se las tenga en cuenta. George Eliot lo ha expresado admirablemente: «En estas frágiles vasijas se conserva a través de los tiempos el tesoro del afecto humano». En *Romeo y Julieta*, Julieta tiene que ser importante, al igual que en *Adam Bede*, *El molino del Floss*, *Middlemarch* y *Daniel Deronda* tienen que serlo Hetty Sorrel, Maggie Tulliver, Rosamond Vincy y Gwendolen Harleth, y tener siempre a su disposición tanta tierra firme para sus pies y tanto aire fresco para sus pulmones. Son representantes, no obstante, de lo difícil que le resulta a su clase, en cada caso individual, convertirse en centro de interés, tan difícil de hecho que muchos creadores expertos, como por ejemplo Dickens y Walter Scott, o incluso alguien de trazo tan sutil como R. L. Stevenson, han preferido no emprender dicha tarea. De hecho, existen escritores que imaginamos que se refugian en que algo así no merece ni siquiera intentarlo, justificación esta tan pusilánime que contribuye muy poco a salvaguardar su honor. Nunca es prueba de un valor, o ni tan siquiera de la percepción imperfecta que de uno tengamos, jamás es tributo a verdad alguna, que representemos dicho valor incorrectamente. Jamás, desde el punto de vista artístico, compensa que, por su pobre percepción de una cosa, el artista la represente de la peor forma posible. Hay maneras mucho mejores que esa, la mejor de las cuales es, para empezar, demostrar menos estulticia.

Cabría responder, entretanto, en relación con el testimonio dado por Shakespeare y George Eliot, que su concesión a la «importancia» de sus Julietas, Cleopatras y Porcias (incluso en el caso de Porcia como ejemplo y modelo perfecto de joven inteligente y presuntuosa) y a la de sus Hetties, Maggies, Rosamundas y Gwendolines, padece el menoscabo de que a esas figuras desdibujadas no se les permita, cuando figuran como soporte principal del tema, ser

protagonistas en solitario, sino que por el contrario se destaquen sus defectos por medio de escenas cómicas y tramas secundarias, en palabras de los dramaturgos, cuando no mediante asesinatos, batallas y demás grandes convulsiones del mundo. Si se las muestra con toda la «importancia» que ellas querrían posiblemente pretender, la prueba de la misma recae en un centenar de otras personas, hechas de material mucho más firme, cada una de las cuales está además inmersa en un centenar de relaciones que para *ellas* tienen el mismo grado de importancia que las que mantienen con las heroínas. Cleopatra le importa, infinitamente, a Antonio, pero sus compañeros, sus antagonistas, el estado de Roma y la inminente batalla son también de una importancia prodigiosa; Porcia le importa a Antonio, a Shylock, al príncipe de Marruecos y a los cincuenta aspirantes a príncipe, pero para dichos caballeros existen otros asuntos de candente interés; para Antonio, sin ir más lejos, están Shylock y Bassanio, sus empresas fracasadas y la extrema gravedad de su situación. Esa gravedad extrema, a su vez, tiene importancia para Porcia; aunque, de ese modo, cobra interés general por el hecho de que Porcia nos importa a *nosotros*. Que ella nos importe, en cualquier caso, y que casi todo vuelva a ese punto de partida refuerza mi tesis de lo adecuado del ejemplo para demostrar el valor que se reconoce a esta sencilla joven. (Digo «sencilla» joven porque imagino que ni siquiera Shakespeare, por muy ocupado que estuviese principalmente en describir las pasiones de los príncipes, habría pretendido basar el atractivo del personaje en su elevada posición social.) Es un ejemplo perfecto de la tremenda dificultad que tuve que sortear: la dificultad de hacer de la «frágil vasija» de George Eliot, si no el único centro de nuestra atención, sí al menos el que con mayor claridad la reclama.

Ver cómo se sortea una dificultad es en todo momento, para el artista adicto de verdad, sentir casi como una punzada el hermoso incentivo, sentirlo en verdad hasta el punto de llegar a desear que el peligro se intensifique. En estas condiciones, la dificultad que merece más la pena afrontar no puede ser para él otra que aquella más grande que el caso permita. Por eso recuerdo haber sentido en ese momento (esto es, en presencia siempre de la particular incertidumbre del terreno en el que me había adentrado) que debía de haber una forma mejor que otra —¡mucho mejor que ninguna otra!— de obligarla a librar su batalla. La frágil vasija, esa que transporta el «tesoro» según George Eliot, y por ello de tanta importancia para aquellos que se aproximan movidos por la curiosidad, tiene igualmente posibilidades en sí misma de ser importante, posibilidades que permiten un tratamiento y que de hecho lo requieren, por peculiar que resulte, desde el mismo instante en que se vislumbran por primera vez. Siempre queda la escapatoria de no dar una descripción detallada del agente débil de tales hechizos y utilizar como puente para la evasión, para la retirada y la huida, la visión de su relación con aquellos que la rodean. Se la convierte predominantemente en la visión de la relación *entre ellos*, y ya tenemos el truco: se da una visión general del efecto que el personaje produce y se construye una superestructura a partir de ella con la máxima facilidad. Pues bien, recuerdo a la perfección lo poco que me atraía, ahora que tenía bien establecida mi conexión, esa facilidad máxima, y cómo tuve la impresión de que me libraba de ella al hacer una transposición honrada del peso en los dos platillos de la balanza. «Sitúa el núcleo de la historia en la propia conciencia de la joven —me dije— y te encontrarás con la dificultad más interesante y más hermosa que podrías desear. Mantén ahí el núcleo. Coloca la medida de más peso en ese platillo, que será fundamentalmente la medida de su relación consigo misma. Haz, al mismo tiempo, que solo se interese hasta cierto punto por las cosas que no tienen que ver con ella misma, y no tengas miedo de que dicha relación resulte demasiado limitada. Mientras tanto, coloca en el otro platillo el peso más liviano (que normalmente es el que inclina la balanza del interés): aplica menor presión, en resumen, sobre la conciencia de los satélites de tu heroína, especialmente de los varones; haz que solo tenga interés en la medida en que contribuya al interés principal. Asegúrate, en cualquier caso, de lo que se puede hacer en ese sentido. ¿Qué mejor campo podría haber para poner en práctica el ingenio? La joven permanece, inextinguible, como una criatura encantadora, y el cometido será traducirla a los términos más elevados de esa fórmula, y además, con la mayor precisión posible, traducirla a *todos* ellos. Para depender por completo de ella y de sus problemas sin importancia, para lograrlo, recuerda que será necesario que la "hagas" de verdad.»

Ese fue mi razonamiento, y fue necesario nada menos que ese rigor técnico, ahora lo veo con claridad, para inspirar en mí la confianza adecuada y así poder levantar en una parcela de terreno como aquella la pila de ladrillos ordenada, estructurada y proporcionada que se alza sobre el mismo y que así iba a formar, por decirlo en términos arquitectónicos, un monumento literario. Ese es el aspecto que tiene hoy día para mí *Retrato de una dama*: el de una estructura erigida con competencia «arquitectónica», como habría dicho Turguéniev, que la convierte, a ojos del propio autor, en la creación más proporcionada de su producción después de *Los embajadores*, que habría de seguirla tantos años más tarde y que, sin duda, presenta un acabado superior. A una cosa estaba decidido: a que, aunque

claramente tenía que poner un ladrillo sobre otro para crear interés, no daría pretexto alguno a que dijesen que había algo fuera de línea, de escala o de perspectiva. Edificaría en amplitud, mediante finas bóvedas en realce y arco pintados, como si dijéramos, y sin embargo jamás dejaría ver que las losas blancas y negras del pavimento, el suelo bajo los pies del lector, no alcanzan en todo momento la base de los muros. Ese espíritu cauteloso, al releer ahora el libro, es la nota antigua que más me conmueve: es testimonio, para mí, de la ansiedad con la que procuraba el entretenimiento del lector. Sentía, dadas las posibles limitaciones del tema, que dicha preocupación no podía ser excesiva, y que el desarrollo de aquel no era otra cosa que la plasmación en la forma de esa búsqueda apasionada. Y encuentro, en verdad, que esta es la única forma posible que tengo de explicar la evolución de la fábula: es a partir de ese lema que he nombrado como compruebo que la necesaria agregación ha tenido lugar, que las complicaciones pertinentes se han iniciado. Como es natural, era esencial que la joven fuese un ser complejo; eso era elemental, o, en cualquier caso, la luz a la que Isabel Archer había nacido originalmente. No obstante, eso solo cubría parte del camino, y para atestiguar la complejidad del personaje habría que utilizar otras luces, antagónicas, enfrentadas, de tantos colores distintos, a ser posible, como las luces de los cohetes, los fuegos artificiales y las carretillas de un «espectáculo pirotécnico». Tenía yo, sin duda, un instinto ciego para elegir las complicaciones adecuadas, ya que me considero incapaz de seguir el rastro de aquellas que constituyen, tal como están las cosas, la situación general presentada. Las complicaciones están ahí en lo que valgan, y hay tantas como sería de desear, pero, debo confesar, mi memoria está en blanco con respecto a cómo llegaron y de dónde procedían.

Tengo la impresión de que una mañana me desperté en posesión de mis personajes: de Ralph Touchett y sus padres, de madame Merle, de Gilbert Osmond, su hija y su hermana, de lord Warburton, Caspar Goodwood y la señorita Stackpole, de toda la colección completa de aquellos que contribuyen a la historia de Isabel Archer. Los reconocí, sabía quiénes eran: eran las piezas numeradas de mi rompecabezas, los elementos concretos de mi «trama». Era, sencillamente, como si guiados por su propio impulso se hubiesen infiltrado en mi percepción para dar respuesta a mi pregunta inicial: «Y ahora, ¿qué va a *hacer* ella?». Su respuesta parecía ser que, si confiaba en ellos, me lo mostrarían; con lo cual, tras hacer un llamamiento urgente a que al menos lo hiciesen de la manera más interesante posible, a ellos me confié. Eran como uno de esos grupos de camareros y animadores que llegan en tren cuando la gente da una fiesta en el campo; representan la promesa de que la fiesta se celebrará. La que con ellos mantuve fue una relación excelente, que hizo posible incluso que me relacionase con alguien tan endeble, por su falta de cohesión, como Henrietta Stackpole. Es una realidad familiar al novelista, durante las horas de tensión, que si bien ciertos elementos son esenciales en toda obra, otros son puramente formales; que así como este o aquel personaje, esta o aquella disposición del material, pertenece directamente al tema, por decirlo de algún modo, este o aquel otro le pertenece pero solo de forma indirecta, pues está íntimamente ligado al tratamiento que al mismo se dé. Esta es una verdad, sin embargo, de la que el escritor apenas se beneficia, ya que la única forma de que tenga constancia de ella es mediante una crítica basada en la percepción, crítica que tanto escasea en este mundo. Por otra parte, lo reconozco abiertamente, el novelista no debe pensar en beneficios, pues por ese camino se llega al deshonor. Es decir, solo le cabe pensar en un único beneficio: aquel, sea cual fuere, que se deriva de haber logrado hechizar a través de las formas de atraer la atención más simples, las más sencillas de todas. A esto es a lo único a que tiene derecho; no tiene derecho a nada, no le quedará más remedio que aceptarlo, que le pueda llegar a través del lector, como resultado de un acto de reflexión o de discernimiento de este último. Le es permitido *disfrutar* de tan rendido tributo, esa es otra cuestión, pero a condición de que lo considere una «dádiva» añadida, un simple golpe milagroso de fortuna, el fruto caído de un árbol que no puede pretender haber sacudido. Contra la reflexión, contra el discernimiento, a favor suyo conspiran cielo y tierra; razón por la que, como digo, el novelista debe en muchos casos haberse hecho a la idea desde el principio de trabajar a cambio tan solo de un «salario digno». Dicho salario digno es la garantía de que al lector se le exigirá la menor atención posible para entender el «hechizo». La gratificadora «propina» inesperada es que el lector realice un acto de inteligencia que vaya más allá de eso, una auténtica manzana de oro que cae directamente en el regazo del escritor al mover el árbol el viento. El artista puede naturalmente, cuando es presa de la melancolía, soñar con algún Paraíso (para el arte) en el que sea legal apelar directamente a la inteligencia; ya que de tales extravagancias es imposible esperar que se vea libre por completo su mente ansiosa. Lo máximo que puede hacer es no olvidar que *son* extravagancias.

Todo lo cual tal vez no sea otra cosa que una manera encantadora y retorcida de decir que, en *Retrato*, Henrietta Stackpole era un buen ejemplo de la verdad que acabo de exponer, el mejor que podría citar si no fuera porque Maria Gostrey en *Los embajadores*, en aquel entonces entre las brumas del tiempo, es un ejemplo aún mejor. Cada uno de

estos personajes no es más que una rueda del carruaje; ninguna de ellas forma parte del cuerpo del vehículo ni se la acomoda por un instante en un asiento de su interior. Ahí solo encuentra refugio el tema, bajo la forma del «héroe» o la «heroína», y, por ejemplo, las autoridades de rango superior que tienen el privilegio de acompañar al rey y a la reina en el viaje. Hay razones por las que al escritor le gustaría que esto se percibiese, como le gustaría, en general, que se percibiese en su obra casi todo aquello que él mismo ha sentido y ha aportado. Ya hemos visto, sin embargo, qué vana resulta dicha pretensión, a la que lamentaría dar demasiada importancia. Maria Gostrey y la señorita Stackpole son pues ejemplos, cada una de ellas, de un leve *ficelle*, no del auténtico agente; ya pueden correr «cuanto quieran» al lado del carruaje, ya pueden agarrarse a él hasta perder el aliento (como está claro que hace la pobre señorita Stackpole), que ninguna de ellas, en todo ese tiempo, alcanzará siquiera a poner el pie en el estribo, que ninguna dejará ni por un momento de pisar el camino polvoriento. Podríamos incluso decir que son como las pescaderas que ayudaron a llevar desde Versalles a París, en el día más nefasto de la primera etapa de la Revolución francesa, el carruaje de la familia real. Lo único es, lo reconozco, que en ese caso se me podría bien preguntar: ¿por qué entonces, en la ficción que nos ocupa, he aguantado que Henrietta tuviese una presencia (a todas luces excesiva) tan oficiosa, tan extraña y casi tan inexplicable? Trataré de explicar a continuación en la medida de lo posible y de manera más conciliadora dicha anomalía.

Una cuestión que deseo todavía aclarar más es que si la relación de confianza alcanzada con los actores de mi drama que *eran*, al contrario de la señorita Stackpole, los auténticos agentes, resultaba excelente, todavía me faltaba la relación con el lector, asunto completamente distinto y que me parecía que no podía confiar a nadie que no fuese yo mismo. Esa preocupación fue plasmándose en consecuencia en la inmensa paciencia con la que, como he dicho, fui colocando un ladrillo sobre otro. Dichos ladrillos —entendiendo como tales, por cierto, también los pequeños toques, las invenciones y los adornos— se me antojan poco menos que innumerables, colocados y encajados con cuidado escrupuloso. Es el resultado del detalle, de la minuciosidad; aunque, si en este sentido fuera uno a decirlo todo, expresaría la esperanza de que el aire general más amplio del modesto monumento perviva aún. Creo al menos hallar la clave de parte de toda esta explicación prolija, llena de ansia e ingenio, cuando recuerdo haberme centrado, en interés de mi joven heroína, en el más obvio de sus predicamentos. «¿Qué va a “hacer”?» Pues bien, lo primero que hará será viajar a Europa, lo que de hecho, inevitablemente, constituirá una parte no precisamente pequeña de su aventura principal. Viajar a Europa en esta época maravillosa es, hasta para las «frágiles vasijas», una aventura menor; pero ¿qué podría ser más cierto que por un lado —el lado de la independencia de azares desastrosos, de accidentes patéticos por mar y tierra, de batallas, asesinatos y muertes repentinas— sus aventuras tienen que ser menores? Sin la percepción que Isabel tiene de ellas, sin la inclinación hacia ellas, podríamos decir que no son nada en absoluto. Pero ¿no residen precisamente la belleza y la dificultad en mostrar su conversión mística en ese sentido, su conversión en materia del drama o, palabra aún más bella, de la «historia»? En mi opinión estaba tan claro como el agua. Pienso que dos ejemplos muy buenos de este efecto de conversión, dos ejemplos de esta rara química, son las páginas en las que Isabel, al entrar en el salón de Gardencourt tras volver de un húmedo paseo, aquella tarde de lluvia, se encuentra a madame Merle en posesión del lugar, a madame Merle sentada al piano, absorta por completo pero totalmente serena, y reconoce en lo más profundo de su ser, al sonar esa hora, en la presencia allí, entre las crecientes sombras, de ese personaje del que hasta un momento antes jamás había oído hablar, que ese es un punto de inflexión en su vida. Es espantoso tener razones en demasía para explicar cualquier demostración artística, poner los puntos sobre las íes en insistir en las propias intenciones, y no es mi deseo hacerlo en este punto; pero la cuestión aquí estribaba en producir la máxima intensidad con el mínimo de tensión.

Había que elevar el tono del interés hasta el límite sin alterar la clave de los elementos; de tal modo que, si todo el conjunto causaba la debida impresión, pudiera yo mostrar lo que una vida interior «fascinante» puede hacer por la persona que la vive incluso si continúa su curso completamente normal. Y no se me ocurre una aplicación más coherente de ese ideal que no sea la de ese largo parlamento, justo después de pasar la mitad del libro, de mi joven heroína tras la extraordinaria vigilia de meditación con ocasión de lo que iba a resultar ser un hito en su vida. Reducida a su esencia, no es sino una vigilia dedicada a la búsqueda y la crítica; pero impulsa la acción mucho más lejos de lo que se habría conseguido con veinte «incidentes». Fue ideada para tener toda la vivacidad de un incidente con toda la economía de una imagen. Isabel está despierta, sentada junto a la chimenea medio apagada, hasta bien entrada la noche, bajo el hechizo de unas revelaciones en las que de repente descubre que falta la nitidez definitiva. Es simplemente una representación de cómo estando inmóvil *ve* y un intento de conseguir que la mera lucidez inmóvil de su acto sea tan interesante como la sorpresa de que aparezca una caravana o la identificación de un pirata.

Representa, por otra parte, una de las identificaciones caras al novelista e incluso indispensables para él; pero todo sigue sin que otra persona se le acerque y sin que ella se mueva de su silla. Es obviamente lo mejor del libro, pero a la vez tan solo una ilustración suprema del plan general. En cuanto a Henrietta, a quien no he terminado de pedir disculpas, con toda esa exuberancia suya no ejemplifica, me temo, un elemento del plan por mí trazado, sino tan solo un exceso de celo por mi parte. De forma tan temprana comenzó mi tendencia a *tratar en exceso* mi tema, en lugar de hacerlo con contención cuando había de elegir o existía algún peligro. (Muchos de mis compañeros de oficio, imagino, están lejos de mostrarse de acuerdo conmigo, pero yo siempre he sostenido que tratar en exceso es el menor de los males.) «Tratar» el tema de *Retrato* equivalía a no olvidar nunca, en ningún momento, que aquel tenía la obligación específica de ser entretenido. Existía el peligro de la ya comentada «superficialidad», que había que evitar a toda costa cultivando lo vívido. Así es al menos como hoy lo veo. Henrietta, en aquel momento, debía de formar parte de mi fantástica idea de lo que era vívido. Y además había otra cuestión. En los años precedentes había venido a vivir a Londres, y en aquellos tiempos, según mi percepción, una luz «internacional» gravitaba densa y rica sobre la escena. Era la luz a la cual se veía gran parte del cuadro. Pero *esa* es otra cuestión. En verdad, hay demasiado que decir.

HENRY JAMES

Retrato de una dama

1

Cuando concurren ciertas circunstancias, pocos momentos hay en la vida que resulten más gratos que esa hora que se dedica a la ceremonia conocida como el té de la tarde. Hay circunstancias en las que, tanto si uno toma té como si no —y, por supuesto, hay gente que jamás lo hace—, la situación resulta placentera por sí misma. Aquellas que tengo en la mente al iniciar la narración de esta sencilla historia hacían que el escenario de tan inocente pasatiempo resultase digno de admiración. Los elementos del ligero refrigerio habían sido colocados sobre el césped de una antigua casa solariega inglesa, en lo que yo calificaría como el momento perfecto, en mitad de una espléndida tarde de verano. Parte de dicha tarde ya había transcurrido, pero todavía quedaba mucha por delante, y lo que restaba era de una calidad única e insuperable. El crepúsculo de verdad tardaría muchas horas en llegar; pero la intensidad de la luz estival había comenzado a disminuir, el aire se había vuelto sedoso, las sombras se alargaban sobre la hierba suave y tupida. Crecían con lentitud, sin embargo, y la escena transmitía esa sensación del deleite anunciado que tal vez sea la principal fuente de placer al presenciar un momento así a una hora como esa. De las cinco a las ocho de la tarde transcurre en ciertas ocasiones una pequeña eternidad; pero en una como la que nos ocupa dicho intervalo no puede ser otra cosa que una eternidad de placer. Las personas allí presentes disfrutaban con calma de dicho placer, y no eran miembros del sexo al que se supone que pertenecen los devotos incondicionales de la ceremonia que acabo de mencionar. Las siluetas dibujadas sobre la perfecta pradera eran rectilíneas y angulosas; eran las sombras de un hombre de edad sentado en un hondo sillón de mimbre junto a una mesa baja sobre la que habían servido el té, y las de dos jóvenes que pasaban ante él, en desganada charla, una y otra vez. El anciano sostenía la taza en la mano; era una pieza de un tamaño inusual, de un modelo distinto al del resto del juego, y estaba pintada con brillantes colores. Dio cuenta de su contenido con mucha circunspección, sosteniéndola durante largo rato cerca de la barbilla, con el rostro vuelto hacia la casa. Sus acompañantes, que o bien ya habían terminado el té o tal privilegio los dejaba indiferentes, fumaban cigarrillos mientras proseguían su caminar. Uno de ellos, de vez en cuando, al pasar, miraba con cierta atención hacia el hombre de más edad, quien, ignorante de tal observación, descansaba la vista en la fachada de intenso color rojo de su residencia. La casa que se alzaba al fondo de la pradera era una estructura merecedora de tal consideración y el objeto más característico del cuadro tan peculiarmente inglés que intento bosquejar.

La mansión se elevaba sobre una loma de poca altura junto a un río, el cual no era otro que el Támesis, a unas cuarenta millas de Londres. Una larga fachada de ladrillo rojo con gabletes, cuya apariencia el tiempo y los elementos habían dejado marcada con todo tipo de juegos pictóricos, o aunque, solo para mejorarla y refinarla, ofrecía a la pradera sus zonas cubiertas de hiedra, su profusión de chimeneas y sus ventanas cegadas por las enredaderas. La casa tenía nombre e historia; al anciano caballero que tomaba el té le habría encantado narrarles todas esas cosas; cómo había sido construida en tiempos de Eduardo VI, había ofrecido albergue por una noche a la gran Isabel (cuya augusta persona había descansado sobre un lecho inmenso, suntuoso y con una inclinación terrible que aún constituía el principal orgullo del ala de los dormitorios), había resultado dañada y deteriorada en el transcurso de las guerras de Cromwell, y luego, durante la Restauración, había sido reconstruida y muy ampliada; y cómo, finalmente, tras haber sido remodelada y desfigurada en el siglo XVIII, había pasado a las cuidadosas manos de un sagaz banquero estadounidense que la había adquirido originalmente porque (debido a circunstancias demasiado complicadas para ser expuestas aquí) se la habían ofrecido a precio de auténtica ganga: dicho caballero la había comprado tras mucho refunfuñar ante su fealdad, su antigüedad, su incomodidad, y ahora, después de veinte años, se había dado cuenta de que sentía auténtica pasión estética por ella, tanta, que la conocía hasta el más mínimo detalle y les podría haber indicado dónde situarse para verlos todos combinados y cuál era el momento exacto en que las sombras de las distintas protuberancias —que caían suavemente sobre el ladrillo cálido y desgastado— tenían la proporción adecuada. Además, como he dicho, el anciano habría sido capaz de enumerar a los sucesivos propietarios y habitantes de la casa, varios de los cuales gozaban de reconocida fama; y lo habría hecho, sin embargo, con la convicción infundada de que la última fase del destino de la mansión no era ni de lejos la menos honorable. La fachada de la casa que daba a la extensión de césped que nos concierne no era aquella por la que se entraba; esa

quedaba en otra ala muy distinta. Aquí lo que primaba era la intimidad, y la amplia alfombra de césped que cubría la loma no parecía ser sino una prolongación del lujoso interior. Los frondosos robles y hayas inmóviles proyectaban una sombra tan densa como la de unas cortinas de terciopelo; y el lugar estaba decorado como si de una estancia se tratase, con mullidos asientos, con mantas de vivos colores, con libros y periódicos que yacían desperdigados por el césped. El río quedaba a cierta distancia; allí donde el terreno empezaba a inclinarse, acababa la pradera propiamente dicha. Sin embargo no por ello la bajada al río era menos agradable.

El anciano caballero junto a la mesa del té, que había llegado de Estados Unidos treinta años atrás, había traído consigo, como parte integrante del equipaje, su fisonomía puramente estadounidense; y no solo se la había traído consigo, sino que la había mantenido en la mejor forma, de manera que, de ser necesario, podría llevársela de vuelta a su propio país con total confianza. En el momento presente, como es obvio, no era muy probable que se desplazase; los viajes habían llegado a su fin y ahora disfrutaba del descanso que precede al reposo definitivo. Tenía un rostro enjuto y perfectamente afeitado, de rasgos proporcionados y expresión de plácida agudeza. Era evidentemente un rostro en el que no había gran gama de expresiones, por lo que aquel aire sagaz y complacido resultaba todo un logro. Parecía comunicar que había triunfado en la vida, y a la vez decir también que su éxito no había sido exclusivo ni inmerecido, sino que había habido en él mucha de la inocuidad del fracaso. Ciertamente había adquirido gran experiencia en el trato con los hombres, pero existía una sencillez casi rústica en la tenue sonrisa que jugueteaba sobre las mejillas anchas y huesudas e iluminaba sus animados ojos cuando al fin, con lentitud y cuidado, dejó la enorme taza de té sobre la mesa. Vestía pulcramente, con prendas negras, aunque un chal doblado descansaba sobre sus rodillas y tenía los pies metidos en gruesas chinelas bordadas. Un precioso collie estaba tumbado en el césped junto al sillón y observaba el rostro del amo con casi igual ternura a la que aquel mostraba al contemplar la más majestuosa fisonomía de la casa; y un cachorrillo de terrier, revoltoso y peludo, prestaba una atención un tanto desganada a los otros caballeros.

Uno de ellos era un hombre de unos treinta y cinco años, muy bien constituido, con rasgos ingleses tan representativos como lo eran de su país los del anciano caballero que acabo de describir: rostro hermoso, de aspecto fresco, claro y franco, de facciones rectas y bien delineadas, ojos grises vivaces y adornado por una barba color castaño. Tenía aspecto de persona afortunada, de estar dotado de una excepcional brillantez, el aire de contar con un temperamento alegre fecundado por una refinada civilización, que habría podido despertar la envidia de cualquier observador casual. Calzaba botas con espuelas, como si acabase de desmontar tras una larga cabalgada; se cubría con un sombrero blanco que parecía demasiado grande para él; se agarraba las manos a la espalda y, en una de ellas, en el puño grande y bien formado, apretaba un par de guantes de piel gruesa, arrugados y sucios.

Su acompañante, que a su lado medía con pasos la longitud de la pradera, era una persona de hechuras completamente distintas, que, pese a poder suscitar una seria curiosidad, no hubiese provocado, como en el caso del otro, el deseo casi ciego de encontrarse en su lugar. Alto, flaco, desgarbado y esmirriado de constitución, tenía un rostro feo, demacrado, despierto y simpático, provisto, aunque no pueda decirse que adornado, de bigote poco poblado y patillas. Su aspecto era inteligente y enfermizo, combinación no muy venturosa, y vestía chaqueta de terciopelo marrón. Escondía las manos en los bolsillos, y había algo en la manera de hacerlo que denotaba en ello una costumbre inveterada. Su paso era vacilante e indeciso; las piernas carecían de firmeza. Como he dicho, cada vez que pasaba por delante del anciano sentado en la silla posaba en él la mirada; y en ese instante, al ver los rostros de ambos a un tiempo, era fácil darse cuenta de que se trataba de padre e hijo. Por fin la mirada del padre se cruzó con la del hijo y le dedicó una tenue sonrisa en respuesta.

—Me encuentro muy bien —dijo.

—¿Te has tomado el té? —preguntó el hijo.

—Sí, y lo he disfrutado.

—¿Quieres un poco más?

El anciano se lo pensó con placidez.

—Pues me parece que voy a esperar, ya veré.

En su tono se notaba el acento americano.

—¿Tienes frío? —preguntó el hijo.

El padre se frotó las piernas lentamente.

—Pues no lo sé. No sabría decirlo mientras no lo sienta.

—Tal vez alguien podría sentirlo por ti —dijo el más joven de los dos, riéndose.

—¡Ah, tengo la esperanza de que alguien sienta siempre algo por mí! ¿No siente usted nada por mí, lord Warburton?

—Por supuesto que sí, muchísimo —respondió al instante el caballero de dicho nombre—. Y diría que parece encontrarse usted de lo más cómodo.

—Pues sí, supongo que así es en general. —Y el anciano bajó la vista al chal verde y se lo alisó sobre las rodillas—. La verdad es que llevo tantos años encontrándome cómodo que la fuerza de la costumbre hace que no lo valore.

—Sí, eso es lo que pasa con la comodidad —dijo lord Warburton—, que solo la valoramos cuando nos sentimos incómodos.

—Tengo la impresión de que nosotros somos un tanto peculiares —observó su acompañante.

—Desde luego que sí, no hay duda alguna de que lo somos —musitó lord Warburton.

Y, a continuación, los tres hombres se quedaron un rato callados; los dos más jóvenes con la mirada fija en el anciano, que al fin pidió otra taza de té.

—Tengo la impresión de que ese chal le molesta —reanudó la conversación lord Warburton mientras el otro joven volvía a llenarle la taza al anciano.

—¡Ah no, el chal no se lo puede quitar! —exclamó el caballero de la chaqueta de terciopelo—. No le metas semejante idea en la cabeza.

—Es de mi esposa —dijo el anciano sin más explicación.

—Ah, bueno, si se trata de razones sentimentales…

Y lord Warburton hizo un gesto de disculpa.

—Supongo que tendré que devolvérselo cuando venga —añadió el anciano.

—No harás nada por el estilo. Te lo quedarás para cubrir tus pobres piernas.

—No te metas con mis piernas, ¿eh? —dijo el anciano—. A mí me parecen igual de buenas que las tuyas.

—Pues tú puedes meterte cuanto quieras con las mías —repuso el hijo mientras le daba la taza de té.

—Es que somos un par de patos renqueantes; no veo yo que haya mucha diferencia.

—No sabes cuánto te agradezco que me llames pato. ¿Qué tal está el té?

—Bueno… bastante caliente.

—Se supone que eso es un mérito.

—Desde luego que tiene mérito —murmuró el anciano en tono afable—. Tengo un enfermero excelente, lord Warburton.

—¿Tal vez un poco torpe? —preguntó su señoría.

—Claro que no, de torpe nada, teniendo en cuenta que también él está achacoso. Es muy buen enfermero, para tratarse de alguien que también está enfermo. Por eso yo lo llamo mi enfermero enfermo.

—¡Ya está bien, papá! —exclamó el joven poco agraciado.

—Es que es así; ojalá no lo fuese. Pero supongo que no puedes evitarlo.

—Podría intentarlo, me estás dando una idea —dijo el joven.

—¿Ha estado usted enfermo alguna vez, lord Warburton? —preguntó el padre.

El aludido reflexionó un momento.

—Sí, señor, en una ocasión, en el golfo Pérsico.

—Te está tomando el pelo, papá —dijo el otro joven—. Es una especie de broma.

—Ya, parece que se hacen muchas bromas de esas hoy día —respondió el padre—. En cualquier caso, no tiene usted aspecto de haber estado enfermo, lord Warburton.

—Lo que a él le enferma es la vida; es lo que me estaba contando, y con bastante rotundidad —dijo el amigo de lord Warburton.

—¿Es eso cierto, caballero? —preguntó el anciano con seriedad.

—Así es, y su hijo no me ha proporcionado consuelo alguno. Resulta inútil hablar con él, es un auténtico cínico. Da la impresión de no creer en nada.

—Eso es otra especie de broma —dijo la persona acusada de cinismo.

—Lo que le pasa es que tiene una salud muy mala —le explicó el padre a lord Warburton—. Y eso le afecta a su mente e influye en su forma de ver las cosas; da la impresión de que sienta que jamás ha tenido una oportunidad. Pero es algo por completo teórico, ¿sabe usted?; y no parece afectar a su estado de ánimo. Rara es la vez en que no lo haya visto alegre… como en este momento. A menudo es él quien me alegra a mí.

El joven objeto de aquella descripción miró a lord Warburton y se echó a reír.

—¿Es esa una encendida alabanza o una acusación de frivolidad? ¿Te gustaría que pusiese en práctica mis teorías, papá?

—¡Vive Dios que entonces sí que veríamos cosas extrañas! —exclamó lord Warburton.

—Espero que tú no hayas adoptado ese tono —dijo el anciano.

—El tono de Warburton es peor que el mío; él finge estar aburrido. Yo no me siento aburrido en absoluto; yo encuentro la vida demasiado interesante.

—Conque demasiado interesante, ¿eh? Pues no deberías permitir que fuese así.

—Jamás me aburro cuando vengo aquí —aseguró lord Warburton—. La conversación resulta de lo más entretenida.

—¿Es esa otra especie de broma? —preguntó el anciano—. Usted no tiene excusa para aburrirse en ningún lado. Cuando yo tenía su edad, no sabía lo que era el aburrimiento.

—Debió de tardar mucho en madurar.

—No, maduré muy deprisa; esa es precisamente la razón. Cuando contaba veinte años ya había madurado a conciencia. Trabajaba de sol a sol. Usted no se aburriría si tuviese algo que hacer; pero ustedes los jóvenes están todos excesivamente ociosos. Piensan demasiado en su propio placer. Son demasiado caprichosos, demasiado indolentes, y demasiado ricos.

—¡Quién fue a hablar! —exclamó lord Warburton—. ¡No es usted precisamente la persona más indicada para acusar a un congénere de ser demasiado rico!

—¿Lo dice porque soy banquero? —preguntó el anciano.

—Por eso, si quiere; y porque cuenta con recursos ilimitados, ¿o acaso no es así?

—No es tan rico —salió en su defensa el otro joven—. Ha donado una cantidad de dinero inmensa.

—Ya, pero imagino que era suyo —dijo lord Warburton—, y, en tal caso, ¿puede haber mayor prueba de riqueza? Un benefactor público debería ser el último en decir que los demás tienen excesivo apego al placer.

—Papá tiene mucho apego al placer… al placer de los demás.

El anciano negó con la cabeza.

—Yo no albergo la más mínima pretensión de haber contribuido al solaz de mis contemporáneos.

—¡Mi querido padre, no seas tan modesto!

—Esa es una especie de broma, señor —aseguró lord Warburton.

—Los jóvenes gastáis demasiadas bromas. Cuando no hay bromas, os quedáis sin nada.

—Por fortuna, siempre quedarán más bromas —aseguró el joven poco agraciado.

—Yo no estoy de acuerdo. Creo que las cosas se están poniendo serias. Vosotros los jóvenes ya os daréis cuenta.

—En la creciente seriedad de las cosas… ahí encontraremos una oportunidad para el humor.

—Pues tendrá que ser humor negro —dijo el anciano—. Estoy convencido de que habrá grandes cambios; y de que no todos serán para mejor.

—Estoy completamente de acuerdo con usted, señor —declaró lord Warburton—. Estoy seguro de que van a producirse grandes cambios, y de que acontecerán todo tipo de cosas extrañas. Por eso me resulta tan difícil poner en práctica sus consejos. Si lo recuerda, el otro día me dijo que yo necesitaba algo a lo que «agarrarme». Uno vacila antes de agarrarse a algo que puede saltar por los aires en cualquier momento.

—Lo que deberías hacer es agarrarte a una mujer bonita —dijo su amigo—. Es que está intentando enamorarse —añadió a modo de explicación, dirigiéndose a su padre.

—¡Hasta las mujeres bonitas podrían saltar por los aires! —exclamó lord Warburton.

—No, no, ellas permanecerán firmes —replicó el anciano—; a ellas no les afectarán los cambios sociales y políticos a los que acabo de referirme.

—¿Quiere decir que no van a abolirlas? Pues muy bien, en ese caso, agarraré a una lo antes posible y me la colgaré del cuello como un salvavidas.

—Las mujeres nos salvarán —dijo el anciano—; es decir, las mejores de ellas lo harán, porque yo distingo entre las mujeres. Conquista a una de las buenas y cásate con ella, y tu vida será mucho más interesante.

Un silencio momentáneo subrayó tal vez para sus oyentes el carácter magnánimo de aquel discurso, ya que no era ningún secreto ni para el hijo ni para el visitante que su propia experiencia del matrimonio no había sido afortunada. Pero, como él mismo había dicho, sabía distinguir entre las mujeres; y aquellas palabras tal vez podrían entenderse como la confesión de un error personal, aunque, desde luego, no sería apropiado que ninguno de sus acompañantes

comentase que, al parecer, la dama de su elección no había sido una de las mejores.

—Si me caso con una mujer interesante, me sentiré interesado, ¿es eso lo que quiere decir? —preguntó lord Warburton—. Yo no tengo intención alguna de casarme… su hijo lo ha tergiversado; pero nunca se puede saber lo que una mujer interesante podría hacer de mí.

—Me gustaría ver qué entiendes tú por una mujer interesante —dijo su amigo.

—Mi querido amigo, las ideas no pueden verse; especialmente unas ideas tan sumamente etéreas como las mías. Ya sería un gran paso adelante que pudiese verlas yo.

—Bueno, puede usted enamorarse de quien le plazca, pero le prohíbo que se enamore de mi sobrina —dijo el anciano.

Su hijo soltó una carcajada.

—¡Va a pensar que se lo dices como una provocación! Mi querido padre, vives con los ingleses desde hace treinta años, y se te han pegado muchas de las cosas que dicen. Pero ¡nunca has aprendido cuáles son las que se callan!

—Yo digo lo que me place —respondió el anciano con toda serenidad.

—No tengo el honor de conocer a su sobrina —dijo lord Warburton—. Creo que es la primera vez que oigo hablar de ella.

—Es sobrina de mi esposa; la señora Touchett la trae con ella a Inglaterra.

El joven señor Touchett se lo explicó:

—Mi madre, como sabes, ha pasado el invierno en Estados Unidos, y estamos esperando su regreso. Ha escrito que ha descubierto allí a una sobrina y que la ha invitado a venirse con ella.

—Ya veo… qué amable de su parte —dijo lord Warburton—. ¿Es interesante la joven?

—Apenas sabemos más de ella que tú; mi madre no nos ha dado detalles. Se comunica con nosotros principalmente por medio de telegramas, y sus telegramas son más bien indescifrables. Dicen que las mujeres no saben escribir telegramas, pero mi madre ha llegado a dominar por completo el arte de la concisión. «Cansada América, calor insoportable, regreso Inglaterra con sobrina, primer buque camarote decente.» Ese es el tipo de mensaje que recibimos de ella, y eso decía el último que llegó. Pero había habido otro antes, que creo que contenía la primera mención a dicha sobrina. «Cambié hotel, muy malo, recepcionista insolente, dirección aquí. Recogido hija hermana, murió año pasado, ir a Europa, dos hermanas, de lo más independiente.» Mi padre y yo no hemos dejado de hacernos preguntas sobre el mensaje; parece susceptible a muchas interpretaciones.

—Hay una cosa en él que está muy clara —dijo el anciano—: al empleado del hotel le ha dado un buen rapapolvo.

—Yo ni siquiera estoy seguro de eso, ya que consiguió quitársela de en medio. Al principio pensamos que la hermana citada podía ser la del recepcionista; pero la posterior mención a una sobrina parece probar que hace alusión a una de mis tías. Después está la cuestión de quién son las otras dos hermanas; probablemente sean dos hijas de mi difunta tía. Pero ¿quién es «de lo más independiente», y en qué sentido se emplea dicho término? Ese punto todavía no lo hemos aclarado. ¿Se refiere la expresión más concretamente a la joven dama que mi madre ha adoptado, o caracteriza a todas las hermanas por igual? ¿Y está utilizada en sentido moral o económico? ¿Indica que han quedado bien provistas económicamente, o que no desean estar sujetas a obligación alguna? ¿O quiere simplemente decir que les gusta hacer las cosas a su manera?

—Por más significados que tenga, ese está bastante claro —comentó el señor Touchett.

—Tendrás ocasión de comprobarlo por ti mismo —dijo lord Warburton—. ¿Cuándo llega la señora Touchett?

—No tenemos ni idea. Tan pronto como consiga un camarote decente. Puede que todavía siga esperando uno; aunque también es posible que ya haya desembarcado en Inglaterra.

—En tal caso, probablemente les habría telegrafiado.

—Jamás manda un telegrama cuando lo esperas… solo cuando no lo esperas —dijo el anciano—. Le gusta presentarse de improviso; piensa que me va a pillar haciendo algo malo. Hasta ahora nunca ha sido así, pero ella no pierde la esperanza.

—Es por esa característica familiar suya, por esa independencia de la que habla. —La apreciación del hijo al respecto era más favorable—. Por mucho espíritu que tengan esas jóvenes, el de ella no se queda atrás. Le gusta hacerlo todo por sí misma y no cree que nadie tenga capacidad para ayudarla. De mí piensa que valgo lo mismo que un sello de correos sin engomar, y jamás me perdonaría que osase ir a Liverpool a recibirla.

—¿Me avisarás al menos de la llegada de tu prima? —rogó lord Warburton.

—Solo con la condición que he puesto: ¡que no se enamore de ella! —intervino el señor Touchett.

—Eso me parece una crueldad. ¿Es que no me considera lo suficientemente bueno?

—Le considero demasiado bueno. Es porque no me gustaría que se casase con usted. Ella no viene aquí en busca de marido, o eso espero; hay tantas jóvenes que sí lo hacen, como si en nuestro país no hubiese buenos maridos. Y, además, lo más probable es que esté comprometida; las jóvenes de Estados Unidos suelen estarlo, según creo. Además, después de todo, tampoco estoy seguro de que vaya a ser usted un marido maravilloso.

—Lo más probable es que ya esté comprometida. He conocido a muchísimas jóvenes estadounidenses, y siempre lo estaban; pero, vive Dios, que jamás he visto que eso tuviese importancia. Y en cuanto a lo de si sería buen marido —prosiguió el visitante del señor Touchett—, yo tampoco lo tengo muy claro. Lo único que se puede hacer es intentarlo.

—Inténtelo todo lo que usted quiera, pero no lo haga con mi sobrina —dijo sonriente el anciano, cuya postura contraria a la idea era más que nada producto de su buen humor.

—Pues muy bien —dijo lord Warburton con todavía mejor humor—, puede que, después de todo, sea ella la que no se merezca que yo lo intente.

2

Mientras este intercambio de agudezas tenía lugar entre los otros dos, Ralph Touchett se alejó un poco, con aquellos andares suyos desgarbados, las manos en los bolsillos y el pequeño terrier juguetón pegado a los tobillos. Con el rostro vuelto hacia la casa y la pensativa mirada fija en el césped, el joven era objeto de la atención de una persona que acababa de aparecer en la amplia entrada momentos antes de que aquel se percatara de su presencia. Lo que atrajo su atención hacia ella fue la conducta del perro, que había salido disparado de repente entre toda una pequeña salva de agudos ladridos, en los que, sin embargo, se apreciaba más una nota de bienvenida que un tono amenazante. La persona en cuestión era una joven dama, que pareció interpretar de inmediato el recibimiento del pequeño animal. El perro avanzó hacia ella con gran rapidez y se detuvo a sus pies, mirándola y ladrando con fuerza; ante lo cual, sin titubeos, ella se agachó, alargó las manos para cogerlo y lo levantó hasta que sus rostros estuvieron a la misma altura sin que el animal cejase en su rápido parloteo. El amo había tenido ya tiempo de ir tras él y ver que la nueva amiga de Bunchie era una muchacha alta con vestido negro, que a primera vista parecía bonita. Llevaba la cabeza descubierta, como si residiese en la casa, hecho que llenó de perplejidad al hijo del dueño, consciente como era de la ausencia de visitantes que la mala salud del anciano había hecho necesaria desde hacía algún tiempo. Entretanto, los otros dos caballeros habían advertido también la presencia de la recién llegada.

—Dios nos asista, ¿quién es esa desconocida? —había preguntado el señor Touchett.

—Tal vez sea la sobrina de la señora Touchett, la joven independiente —aventuró lord Warburton—. Creo que debe de ser ella, por la forma en que sostiene al perro.

El collie, por su parte, también había permitido que su atención se desviase, y salió al trote en dirección a la joven de la entrada, meneando lentamente la cola al acercarse.

—Pero entonces, ¿dónde está mi esposa? —murmuró el anciano.

—Supongo que la joven la habrá dejado en alguna parte: eso forma parte de la independencia.

La muchacha, sonriente, se dirigió a Ralph con el perro todavía en brazos.

—¿Es suyo este perrito, señor?

—Era mío hasta hace un momento, pero de repente ha adquirido usted un acusado aire de propiedad sobre él.

—¿No podríamos compartirlo? —preguntó la joven—. Es una auténtica monada.

Ralph la miró un instante; era sorprendentemente bonita.

—Se lo puede quedar —respondió entonces.

La joven dama daba muestras de tener muchísima confianza, tanto en sí misma como en los demás, pero aquella inesperada muestra de generosidad hizo que se ruborizara.

—Debería saber que probablemente sea prima suya —le espetó, al tiempo que dejaba al perro en el suelo—. ¡Y aquí viene otro! —añadió de inmediato al acercarse el collie.

—¿Probablemente? —exclamó el joven entre risas—. ¡Creía que eso había quedado claro! ¿Ha llegado con mi madre?

—Sí, hace media hora.

—¿Y ella la ha dejado aquí y se ha vuelto a marchar?

—No, se fue directamente a su habitación, y me dijo que, si lo veía, tenía que decirle que fuera usted a verla allí a las siete menos cuarto.

El joven dirigió la mirada a su reloj.

—Muchísimas gracias; prometo ser puntual. —Y a continuación miró a su prima—. Sea usted bienvenida a esta casa. Estoy encantado de conocerla.

Ella lo examinaba todo con una mirada que denotaba una aguda percepción: a su interlocutor, a los perros, a los dos caballeros bajo los árboles, el hermoso escenario que la rodeaba.

—Jamás he visto nada tan bonito como este lugar. He recorrido toda la casa; es preciosa.

—Siento que lleve tanto tiempo aquí sin que nos hayamos enterado.

—Su madre me dijo que en Inglaterra la gente hacía su llegada con mucha discreción, así que pensé que era lo

adecuado. ¿Es su padre alguno de aquellos caballeros?

—Sí, el mayor, el que está sentado —dijo Ralph.

La joven soltó una carcajada.

—Ya imagino que no será el otro. ¿Quién es el otro?

—Un amigo nuestro: lord Warburton.

—Ah, tenía la esperanza de que hubiese un lord; ¡es como en las novelas! —Y a continuación—: ¡Ven aquí, adorable criatura! —gritó de improviso, al tiempo que se agachaba y cogía de nuevo al perrito.

Seguía en el lugar donde se habían encontrado, sin hacer ademán de acercarse ni de hablar con el señor Touchett, y mientras ella se entretenía en la proximidad del umbral, esbelta y llena de encanto, su interlocutor se preguntó si esperaría que fuese el anciano el que se acercara a presentarle sus respetos. Las jóvenes estadounidenses estaban acostumbradas a que las tratasen con mucha deferencia, y por la información recibida, esta tenía mucha personalidad. Era indiscutible, Ralph lo veía en su rostro.

—¿Quiere venir y conocer a mi padre? —se aventuró a preguntar, pese a todo—. Es mayor y está delicado; no se levanta del sillón.

—¡Ay, pobre hombre, cuánto lo siento! —exclamó la joven, que al instante se encaminó hacia él—. Por su madre, tenía la impresión de que era una persona bastante… extremadamente activa.

Ralph Touchett se quedó un instante en silencio.

—Lleva un año sin verlo.

—Bueno, tiene un sitio precioso donde sentarse. Vamos, perrito.

—Sí, es un lugar fantástico —dijo el joven, mirando de reojo a su acompañante.

—¿Cómo se llama? —preguntó ella, la atención puesta de nuevo en el terrier.

—¿Quién, mi padre?

—Sí —respondió la muchacha, divertida—, pero no le diga que se lo he preguntado.

Para entonces ya habían llegado al lugar donde el anciano señor Touchett estaba sentado, y este se levantó despacio del sillón para presentarse.

—Ha llegado mi madre —anunció Ralph Touchett—, y esta es la señorita Archer.

El anciano posó ambas manos en los hombros de la joven, la examinó un instante con inmensa benevolencia y a continuación la besó con galantería.

—Es un enorme placer para mí verte aquí, pero me habría gustado que nos hubieseis dado la oportunidad de salir a recibiros.

—Oh, nos recibieron —dijo la muchacha—. Había cerca de una docena de criados en el vestíbulo. Y una anciana que nos hacía reverencias en el portón.

—¡Si se nos avisa, podemos hacerlo aún mejor! —Y el anciano sonrió, al tiempo que se frotaba las manos y negaba lentamente con la cabeza, mirándola—. Pero a la señora Touchett no le gustan los recibimientos.

—Se fue directamente a su habitación.

—Sí, y se cerró a cal y canto. Siempre lo hace. Bueno, supongo que la veré la próxima semana.

Y el marido de la señora Touchett, con lentitud, volvió a sentarse.

—Antes de eso —dijo la señorita Archer—. Bajará a cenar, a las ocho. Y usted no se olvide de las siete menos cuarto —añadió, volviéndose hacia Ralph.

—¿Qué pasa a las siete menos cuarto?

—Que tengo que ir a ver a mi madre.

—¡Ah, qué suerte la tuya, muchacho! —comentó el anciano—. Pero siéntate, tienes que tomar el té —indicó a la sobrina de su mujer.

—Me llevaron el té a mi habitación nada más llegar aquí —respondió la joven dama—. Siento que no se encuentre usted bien de salud —añadió, posando la mirada sobre su venerable anfitrión.

—Bueno, es que soy un viejo, querida; me ha llegado la hora de serlo. Pero me encontraré mejor contigo aquí.

La joven se había dedicado de nuevo a examinar todo lo que había a su alrededor: el césped, los magníficos árboles, el Támesis plateado entre los juncos, la hermosa y antigua mansión y, al tiempo que realizaba la inspección, había incluido en la misma a sus acompañantes, con una capacidad de observación fácil de entender en una joven que, saltaba a la vista, era a la vez inteligente y estaba llena de entusiasmo. Se había sentado y había dejado al perrito en el suelo; tenía las blancas manos unidas en el regazo sobre el negro vestido; mantenía erguida la cabeza,

los ojos brillantes, y su figura flexible se volvía con facilidad hacia uno y otro lado, en concordancia con la viveza con que innegablemente captaba las distintas impresiones. Las impresiones que recibía eran innumerables, y todas ellas quedaban reflejadas en una sonrisa limpia y tranquila.

—Jamás he visto nada tan hermoso como esto.

—Sí, está precioso —dijo el señor Touchett—. Conozco la impresión que te produce. Yo también he pasado por eso. Pero tú también eres muy hermosa —añadió con una cortesía en la que no había el más mínimo rastro de cruda jocosidad y con el alegre convencimiento de que su avanzada edad le confería el privilegio de decir cosas así, incluso a jóvenes que podían sentirse alarmadas al oírlas.

No es preciso determinar con exactitud hasta qué punto pudo sentirse alarmada la joven; se puso en pie de inmediato, con un rubor que, sin embargo, no suponía ninguna refutación.

—¡Sí, por supuesto que soy preciosa! —respondió con una breve carcajada—. ¿Cuántos años tiene esta casa? ¿Es isabelina?

—Es estilo Tudor temprano —dijo Ralph Touchett.

La joven se volvió hacia él y examinó su rostro.

—¿Tudor temprano? ¡Qué maravilla! E imagino que habrá muchas otras.

—Hay muchas que son mucho mejores.

—¡No digas eso, hijo mío! —protestó el anciano—. No hay ninguna mejor que esta.

—Yo tengo una muy buena; creo que en ciertos aspectos es bastante mejor —intervino lord Warburton, que hasta el momento no había hablado, pero que había estado observando a la señorita Archer con mirada atenta. Sonriendo, se inclinó ligeramente ante ella; hacía gala de unos modales excelentes con las mujeres. La joven lo apreció al instante; no había olvidado que se trataba de lord Warburton—. Me encantaría enseñársela —añadió.

—No le creas —gritó el anciano—. ¡No vayas a verla! Es un barracón inmundo, no puede ni compararse con esta.

—No sé… no soy quién para juzgar —dijo la joven dirigiéndole una sonrisa a lord Warburton.

El debate carecía de todo interés para Ralph Touchett, que, con las manos en los bolsillos, daba la clara impresión de querer reanudar la conversación con la prima recién hallada.

—¿Le gustan mucho los perros? —preguntó a modo de inicio, y pareció darse cuenta de que era un inicio torpe para un hombre inteligente.

—Sí, muchísimo.

—Tiene que quedarse al terrier, está claro —continuó, todavía con torpeza.

—Me lo quedaré mientras esté aquí, con mucho gusto.

—Espero que sea por mucho tiempo.

—Es muy amable de su parte. No tengo ni idea. Le corresponde a mi tía decidirlo.

—Yo lo decidiré con ella… a las siete menos cuarto.

Y Ralph miró de nuevo su reloj.

—Me alegro de estar aquí, en cualquier caso.

—No creo que usted permita que otros decidan en su lugar.

—Claro que sí; siempre que decidan lo que yo quiera.

—Yo decidiré esto a mi gusto —dijo Ralph—. Me resulta muy difícil de entender que no la hayamos conocido hasta ahora.

—Yo estaba allá; no tenían más que venir a verme.

—¿Allá? ¿Qué quiere decir?

—En Estados Unidos: en Nueva York, Albany y otros lugares del país.

—He estado allí, por todas partes, pero jamás la vi. No lo entiendo.

La señorita Archer titubeó un instante.

—Fue porque hubo algún desacuerdo entre su madre y mi padre, tras la muerte de mi madre, que tuvo lugar cuando yo era una niña. A raíz de aquello, pensamos que nunca los conoceríamos.

—Ah, pero yo no apoyo todas las disputas de mi madre, ¡Dios me libre! —exclamó el joven—. ¿Ha perdido a su padre recientemente? —prosiguió con más seriedad.

—Sí; hace más de un año. Tras su muerte, mi tía fue muy considerada conmigo; fue a verme y me propuso venir con ella a Europa.

—Entiendo —dijo Ralph—. La ha adoptado.

—¿Que me ha adoptado?

La joven lo miró fijamente y de nuevo la cubrió el rubor, junto con una momentánea expresión de dolor que despertó cierta alarma en su interlocutor. Había calculado mal el efecto de sus palabras. Lord Warburton, que parecía sentir el constante deseo de ver más de cerca a la señorita Archer, se acercó a los dos primos al instante y, mientras lo hacía, la joven posó en él sus ojos abiertos de par en par.

—Pues no, no me ha adoptado. No estoy disponible para la adopción.

—Le pido mil perdones —murmuró Ralph—. Quería decir… lo que quería decir… —No tenía muy claro lo que quería decir.

—Lo que quería decir es que ella se ha hecho cargo de mí. Sí, le gusta hacerse cargo de la gente. Ha sido muy amable conmigo; pero yo —añadió con evidente deseo de ser explícita— le tengo mucho aprecio a mi libertad.

—¿Estás hablando de la señora Touchett? —inquirió el anciano desde su sillón—. Ven aquí, querida, y háblame de ella. Siempre agradezco cualquier información.

La joven titubeó de nuevo, sonriendo.

—Es una mujer muy benevolente —respondió, tras lo cual se acercó a su tío, cuya hilaridad había despertado con aquellas palabras.

Lord Warburton se quedó atrás junto a Ralph Touchett, al que al instante dijo:

—Hace un rato querías saber cuál era mi idea de una mujer interesante. ¡Ahí la tienes!

3

La señora Touchett era sin duda una persona con muchas rarezas, de las cuales su comportamiento al volver a casa de su marido tras muchos meses de ausencia era un claro ejemplo. Tenía su propio estilo de hacer todo lo que hacía, y esta es la descripción más sencilla de un personaje que, pese a no carecer en absoluto de gestos generosos, rara vez lograba transmitir una sensación de delicadeza. La señora Touchett podía hacer mucho bien, pero nunca complacía. Esa manera suya, de la que se sentía tan orgullosa, no es que fuese intrínsecamente ofensiva, tan solo se distinguía incuestionablemente de la forma en que los demás hacían las cosas. Las aristas de su personalidad eran tan afiladas que en las personas susceptibles causaban a veces el mismo efecto que un cuchillo. Esa dureza refinada quedó de manifiesto en su comportamiento durante las primeras horas tras su regreso de Estados Unidos, en unas circunstancias en las que parecería que su primer gesto debería haber sido el de intercambiar saludos con su esposo e hijo. La señora Touchett, por razones que ella consideraba excelentes, siempre se retiraba en tales ocasiones a una reclusión impenetrable, y posponía aquella otra ceremonia más sentimental hasta haber puesto remedio al desorden de su atuendo con una meticulosidad que carecía de razones para ser de tan primordial importancia, puesto que ni la belleza ni la vanidad tenían nada que ver en ello. Era una mujer mayor, de rostro poco agraciado, carente de garbo y sin especial elegancia, pero con un sumo respeto hacia sus propios motivos. Normalmente estaba dispuesta a explicar cuáles eran, si dicha explicación se le pedía como un favor; y en tales casos, los motivos resultaban ser completamente distintos de aquellos que se le habían atribuido. Estaba prácticamente separada de su marido, pero no parecía percibir nada anómalo en dicha situación. Había quedado claro, desde los inicios de su vida en común, que jamás habrían de desear lo mismo en el mismo momento, y con tal premisa ella había logrado rescatar el desacuerdo del ámbito vulgar de lo fortuito. Hizo cuanto estuvo en sus manos para erigir aquello en ley, aspecto este mucho más edificante, yéndose a vivir a Florencia, donde se compró una casa y se estableció, y dejando que su marido se quedase al frente de la sucursal de su banco en Inglaterra. Dicha solución la complació enormemente: era acertada y felizmente definitiva. Su marido fue de la misma impresión, en una plaza de Londres cubierta de niebla, donde en ocasiones ese era el hecho más definitivo que era capaz de discernir; pero habría preferido que asuntos tan antinaturales hubiesen tenido una mayor vaguedad. Aceptar el desacuerdo le había supuesto un gran esfuerzo; estaba dispuesto a avenirse a cualquier cosa menos a aquella, y no veía razón alguna para que ni el acuerdo ni el desacuerdo tuviesen que ser tan terribles y permanentes. La señora Touchett no se permitió lamentos ni especulaciones, y normalmente iba una vez al año a pasar un mes con su marido, período durante el cual, al parecer, se esforzaba en convencerlo de que el sistema de vida que había adoptado era el adecuado. A ella no le agradaba el estilo de vida inglés, y contaba con tres o cuatro razones para ello a las que aludía casi siempre; hacían referencia a cuestiones menores de aquel antiguo orden, pero en opinión de la señora Touchett justificaban sobradamente su negativa a residir en el país. Detestaba la salsa de pan, que, en palabras suyas, parecía un emplasto y sabía a jabón; no aprobaba el consumo de cerveza por parte de sus doncellas, y afirmaba que las lavanderas británicas (la señora Touchett era muy exigente con el aspecto de su ropa blanca) no dominaban en absoluto el oficio. A intervalos regulares hacía visitas a su país, pero esta última había sido más larga que cualquiera de las precedentes.

Se había hecho cargo de su sobrina, de eso no cabía ninguna duda. Una húmeda tarde, unos cuatro meses antes de la escena anteriormente narrada, la joven se hallaba sentada con la única compañía de un libro. Decir que se hallaba así ocupada es decir que la soledad no le pesaba, ya que su amor por el conocimiento tenía una cualidad fértil, y ella estaba dotada de gran imaginación. En aquella época, sin embargo, había en su situación una ausencia de novedades que la llegada de una visita inesperada hizo mucho por remediar. La visita no había sido anunciada; la joven se enteró por fin al oírla recorrer la estancia contigua. Era una casa antigua en Albany, una casa doble, grande, cuadrada, con el cartel de venta en las ventanas de uno de los aposentos inferiores. Contaba con dos entradas, una de las cuales llevaba largo tiempo en desuso, pero nunca había sido tapiada. Ambas eran exactamente iguales: grandes puertas blancas en un marco arqueado y con amplios tragaluces laterales, en lo alto de pequeñas escalinatas de piedra rojiza que descendían transversalmente hasta la calzada de adoquines de la calle. Las dos casas unidas constituían una única vivienda, ya que se había derribado el muro de separación y se habían comunicado las estancias. Dichas

estancias, en lo alto de las escaleras, eran muy numerosas y estaban pintadas todas ellas exactamente igual, de un blanco amarillento que con el tiempo se había tornado cetrino. En el tercer piso había una especie de pasadizo con arcos que unía ambos lados de la casa, al que de niñas Isabel y sus hermanas llamaban el túnel y que, pese a ser corto y estar bien iluminado, siempre le daba a la joven la impresión de ser extraño y solitario, sobre todo en las tardes de invierno. De niña, había estado en aquella casa en distintas épocas; en aquellos tiempos era su abuela la que residía allí. Después había habido una ausencia de diez años, seguida por el retorno a Albany antes de la muerte de su padre. Al principio su abuela, la anciana señora Archer, había hecho gala, principalmente con los miembros de su familia, de una gran hospitalidad, y las niñas a menudo pasaban semanas bajo su techo, semanas de las que Isabel guardaba los recuerdos más gratos. El modo de vida era distinto del de su propia casa: más a lo grande, de una mayor abundancia, prácticamente festivo; la disciplina en los aposentos infantiles era deliciosamente laxa y las oportunidades de escuchar la conversación de los mayores (algo que para Isabel constituía un auténtico placer) no tenían límite. Había un constante ir y venir; los hijos e hijas de la abuela y su progenie parecían disfrutar de invitación permanente para visitarla y quedarse, de manera que la casa guardaba hasta cierto punto la apariencia de una concurrida posada de provincias regentada por una anciana posadera llena de amabilidad, que suspiraba de continuo y jamás presentaba la cuenta. Isabel, como es natural, no sabía nada de cuentas, pero incluso de niña encontraba romántico el hogar de su abuela. Había en la parte de atrás un patio cubierto, provisto de un columpio que era objeto de trémulo interés; y más allá había un largo jardín, que descendía hasta los establos, en el que había unos melocotoneros de una familiaridad apenas creíble. Isabel había estado con su abuela en distintas estaciones, pero todas sus visitas tenían en cierto modo sabor a melocotón. Al otro lado de la calle se levantaba una antigua casa conocida como la Casa Holandesa, de peculiar estructura que databa de los primeros tiempos de la época colonial, hecha de ladrillos que se habían pintado de amarillo, coronada por un gablete que apuntaba hacia los forasteros, protegida por una desvencijada valla de madera y situada de lado a la calle. La casa estaba ocupada por una escuela infantil para niños de ambos sexos, y se encargaba de atenderla, o más bien de desatenderla, una dama muy efusiva, de quien lo que más recordaba Isabel era que llevaba siempre el cabello recogido en las sienes con unas extrañas peinetas de andar por casa y que era la viuda de alguien importante. A la niña le habían ofrecido la oportunidad de sentar las bases del conocimiento en aquella institución, pero, tras pasar allí una única jornada, se había quejado de las normas y le habían permitido quedarse en casa, adonde, en los días de septiembre, cuando las ventanas de la Casa Holandesa permanecían abiertas, le llegaba el rumor de voces infantiles que coreaban la tabla de multiplicar, y en tales momentos la euforia de la libertad y el dolor de la exclusión se entremezclaban hasta hacerse indistinguibles. Las bases del conocimiento de Isabel se asentaron en realidad en la quietud de la casa de su abuela, en la que, por no ser aficionados a la lectura la mayoría de sus habitantes, podía hacer uso sin cortapisas de una biblioteca repleta de libros con frontispicios, que cogía encaramada a una silla. Cuando había encontrado uno a su gusto (la portada del libro era su principal guía para la elección) se lo llevaba a un misterioso aposento que había detrás de la biblioteca y que, tradicionalmente, nadie sabía por qué, se conocía como el despacho. Isabel jamás descubrió a quién había pertenecido dicho despacho ni en qué época había prosperado; para ella era suficiente que hubiese allí eco y un agradable olor a moho, y que se utilizase como trastero de muebles viejos caídos en desgracia cuyo deterioro no siempre saltaba a la vista (razón por la que aquel castigo parecía inmerecido y que los convertía en víctimas de la injusticia) y con los cuales, a la manera infantil, había establecido unas relaciones casi humanas y sin duda teatrales. En especial, había un viejo sofá de crin, al que había confiado cientos de penas infantiles. El lugar debía gran parte de su misteriosa melancolía al hecho de que en realidad se entrase a él por la segunda puerta de la casa, la puerta que había sido condenada, y a que estaba protegida por unos cerrojos que a una niñita especialmente delgada le resultaría imposible descorrer. Sabía que aquel portal silencioso e inmóvil se abría a la calle; si las vidrieras de los lados no hubiesen estado cubiertas de papel verde, podría haber visto desde allí la pequeña escalinata marrón y la calzada de adoquines desgastados. Pero no sentía deseos de mirar, ya que eso habría interferido con su teoría de que al otro lado existía un lugar extraño e ignoto, que en la imaginación infantil se convertía, al dictado de su estado de ánimo, en territorio placentero o terrorífico.

Era todavía en el «despacho» donde Isabel se encontraba sentada aquella tarde melancólica de principios de primavera que acabo de mencionar. En esa época, podría haber elegido cualquier otro lugar de la casa, y la estancia que había seleccionado era la que menos vistas tenía. Jamás había abierto la puerta con cerrojos ni había quitado el papel verde (que otras manos habían renovado) de las vidrieras de los lados; nunca había comprobado que al otro lado estaba la vulgar calle. Una intempestiva lluvia fría caía con fuerza; el tiempo en primavera era sin duda un

llamamiento (y por lo que parecía un llamamiento cínico e insincero) a la paciencia. Isabel, sin embargo, prestaba la menor atención posible a las traiciones del cosmos; mantenía la vista fija en el libro e intentaba concentrar la mente. Últimamente se le había ocurrido que tenía una mente muy vagabunda, y había empleado mucho ingenio en adiestrarla con rigor militar para enseñarla a avanzar, detenerse, retroceder y realizar maniobras aún más complicadas al recibir la orden pertinente. En aquel momento acababa de ordenar a su mente que se pusiese en marcha y había estado avanzando con dificultad por los arenosos territorios de una historia del pensamiento alemán. De repente, había sido consciente de unos pasos muy distintos a los de su propia marcha intelectual; había escuchado un momento y percibido que alguien se movía por la biblioteca, que se comunicaba con el despacho. En un primer momento le parecieron los pasos de una persona cuya visita estaba deseando, y a continuación, casi de inmediato, se le revelaron como los de una mujer, y además desconocida… y su posible visitante no era ni lo uno ni lo otro. Aquel andar tenía una cualidad inquisitiva, experimental, que anunciaba que no iba a detenerse ante el umbral del despacho; y, en efecto, la puerta de acceso a la estancia apareció de pronto ocupada por una dama que se detuvo en ese punto y miró con fijeza a nuestra heroína. Era una mujer mayor, poco agraciada, cubierta de arriba abajo por un manto impermeable; tenía un rostro que denotaba una expresión más bien violenta.

—Ah —dijo la dama—, ¿es aquí donde sueles sentarte?

Y examinó con la mirada aquellas mesas y sillas tan heterogéneas.

—No cuando tengo visitas —respondió Isabel, al tiempo que se levantaba para recibir a la intrusa.

La joven condujo a su visitante, que no dejaba de mirar a su alrededor, de nuevo a la biblioteca.

—Por lo visto, tienes otras estancias que están en condiciones mucho mejores. Aunque todo está muy ajado.

—¿Ha venido usted a ver la casa? —preguntó Isabel—. La criada se la mostrará.

—Mándale que se retire; no quiero comprar la casa. Probablemente haya ido a buscarte y ande dando vueltas por el piso de arriba; me dio la impresión de que no era muy inteligente. Será mejor que le digas que no hace falta. —Y entonces, dado que la joven parecía titubear y no saber qué hacer, aquella inesperada crítica le espetó de repente—: Imagino que eres una de sus hijas.

Isabel pensó que tenía unos modales muy extraños.

—Depende de a las hijas de quién se refiera usted.

—A las del difunto señor Archer… y de mi pobre hermana.

—Ah —dijo Isabel lentamente—, usted debe de ser la loca de nuestra tía Lydia.

—¿Es así como vuestro padre os dijo que me llamaseis? Soy tu tía Lydia, pero de loca no tengo nada; no sufro delirio alguno. ¿Y cuál de las hijas eres tú?

—Soy la menor de las tres, y me llamo Isabel.

—Sí; las otras son Lilian y Edith. ¿Y eres tú la más guapa?

—No tengo ni la menor idea —contestó la joven.

—Yo creo que debes de serlo.

Y de esta manera trabaron amistad tía y sobrina. La tía había tenido una disputa años antes con su cuñado tras la muerte de su hermana, al reprocharle la forma en que estaba educando a sus tres hijas. Como él era hombre de mucho carácter, le había dicho que se metiese en sus asuntos, y la dama había seguido el consejo al pie de la letra. Durante muchos años no había mantenido comunicación alguna con él y, tras la muerte del hombre, no había dirigido palabra alguna a las hijas, quienes habían sido educadas en esa actitud tan poco respetuosa hacia ella que acabamos de apreciar en Isabel. La conducta de la señora Touchett era, como de costumbre, completamente deliberada. Su intención había sido ir a Estados Unidos a supervisar sus inversiones (con las que su marido, pese a su importante posición en el mundo de las finanzas, no tenía nada que ver) y aprovechar la ocasión para interesarse por la situación de sus sobrinas. No había necesidad de escribirles, ya que la señora Touchett no daría crédito alguno a la información que sobre ellas recibiese por carta; creía, siempre, que uno tenía que ver las cosas por sí mismo. Isabel, no obstante, descubrió que sabía muchas cosas sobre ellas, que estaba al corriente de la boda de las dos mayores; que sabía que su pobre padre les había dejado muy poco dinero, pero que la casa de Albany, que había pasado a manos de él, iba a ser vendida en beneficio de ellas; que estaba enterada, por último, de que Edmund Ludlow, el marido de Lilian, había asumido la responsabilidad de encargarse del asunto, razón por la que la joven pareja, que se había trasladado a Albany durante la enfermedad del señor Archer, seguía allí en el momento presente y, al igual que Isabel, ocupaba la vieja casa.

—¿Cuánto dinero esperáis obtener por ella? —preguntó la señora Touchett a su acompañante, que la había llevado

a sentarse al salón principal, el cual la dama había examinado sin entusiasmo.

—No tengo ni la menor idea —respondió la joven.

—Es la segunda vez que me contestas eso —replicó su tía—. Y sin embargo no parece que tengas un pelo de tonta.

—No soy tonta, pero de dinero no sé nada.

—Ya, así es como te han educado, como si fueses a heredar un millón. ¿Qué has heredado en realidad?

—De verdad que no podría decírselo. Tendrá que preguntárselo a Edmund y Lilian; dentro de media hora estarán de vuelta.

—En Florencia diríamos que es una casa muy mala —aseguró la señora Touchett—, pero aquí me atrevería a afirmar que se podrá conseguir un buen precio por ella. Debería proporcionaros una suma considerable a cada una de vosotras. Además de eso, seguro que contáis con algo más; resulta francamente extraordinario que no estés enterada. La casa está en muy buen sitio, y lo más probable es que la derriben para construir una galería de tiendas. Me pregunto por qué no os encargáis vosotras de hacerlo; podríais alquilar los locales de las tiendas y sacar grandes beneficios.

Isabel la miró atónita; la idea de alquilar tiendas era algo nuevo para ella.

—Confío en que no la derriben —dijo—. Yo le tengo muchísimo cariño.

—No entiendo por qué; tu padre murió aquí.

—Sí, pero no por eso deja de gustarme —respondió la joven de forma un tanto extraña—. Me gustan los sitios en los que han sucedido cosas, incluso si se trata de cosas tristes. Mucha gente ha muerto aquí; la casa ha estado llena de vida.

—¿Eso es lo que tú entiendes por estar llena de vida?

—Quiero decir llena de experiencias, de los sentimientos y pesares de la gente. Y no solo de sus pesares, porque yo he sido muy feliz aquí de niña.

—Deberías ir a Florencia si te gustan las casas en las que han ocurrido cosas, sobre todo muertes. Yo vivo en un antiguo palacio en el que han sido asesinadas tres personas; tres que se sepa, y sabe Dios cuántas más aparte de ellas.

—¿En un antiguo palacio? —repitió Isabel.

—Sí, querida; algo muy distinto a esto. Esta casa es muy burguesa.

Isabel sintió una extraña emoción, ya que siempre había tenido una magnífica opinión de la casa de su abuela. Pero aquella emoción era de una clase que la impulsó a decir:

—Me encantaría ir a Florencia.

—Pues si eres muy buena y haces cuanto yo te diga, te llevaré allí conmigo —declaró la señora Touchett.

La emoción de nuestra joven aumentó; se ruborizó un poco y sonrió a su tía en silencio.

—¿Que haga todo lo que me diga? No creo que pueda prometerle tal cosa.

—No, no me pareces de esa clase de personas. Te gusta hacer las cosas a tu manera, pero yo no soy quién para echarte eso en cara.

—Y, sin embargo, ¡con tal de ir a Florencia —exclamó la joven tras un momento—, soy capaz de prometer casi cualquier cosa!

Edmund y Lilian tardaron en regresar, y la señora Touchett pudo conversar durante una hora sin interrupciones con su sobrina, quien descubrió en ella a un personaje extraño e interesante: un auténtico personaje, casi el primero que había conocido en su vida. Era una excéntrica, como Isabel siempre había imaginado; y hasta ese momento, siempre que la joven había oído tachar de excéntrico a alguien, había pensado que se trataba de una persona desagradable e inquietante. Dicho término siempre le había evocado algo grotesco e incluso siniestro. Pero su tía lo convertía en algo lleno de ironía, aunque de una ironía asequible, o de comicidad, lo que la impulsó a preguntarse si la normalidad, que era todo lo que había conocido hasta el momento, le había resultado alguna vez tan interesante. Lo cierto era que nadie jamás la había cautivado tanto como aquella mujer menuda, de aspecto extranjero, ojos chispeantes y labios finos, que compensaba una apariencia insignificante con un porte distinguido y que, allí sentada con su raído impermeable, hablaba con insólita familiaridad de las cortes europeas. No había ni rastro de frivolidad en la señora Touchett, puesto que no reconocía rangos superiores en la escala social, pero mientras juzgaba a los grandes de la tierra de una forma que lo ponía de manifiesto, disfrutaba de estar causando tanta impresión en una mente ingenua y vulnerable. Al principio, Isabel había respondido a innumerables preguntas, y, al parecer, por sus respuestas la señora Touchett se había formado una inmejorable opinión de la inteligencia de la joven. Pero a continuación había sido ella la que había hecho otras muchas, y las respuestas de su tía, fuesen de la índole que

fuesen, le parecieron materia para una profunda reflexión. La señora Touchett esperó a que volviese su otra sobrina el tiempo que estimó razonable, pero como a las seis la señora Ludlow todavía no había llegado, se dispuso a marcharse.

—Tu hermana debe de ser una auténtica chismosa. ¿Acostumbra a estar fuera tantas horas?

—Usted lleva fuera casi tanto como ella —respondió Isabel—. Debe de haber salido de casa poco antes de su llegada.

La señora Touchett miró a la joven sin resentimiento; parecía gustarle que le contestase con descaro y estar dispuesta a mostrarse benévola.

—Puede que ella no tenga una excusa tan buena como la mía. Dile, de todos modos, que debe venir a verme esta noche a ese espantoso hotel. Puede venir con su marido si quiere, pero no es necesario que vengas tú. Ya tendré tiempo más que suficiente de verte más adelante.

4

La señora Ludlow era la mayor de las tres hermanas, y la que normalmente era considerada la más sensata; se las solía catalogar a Lilian como la práctica, a Edith como la bella y a Isabel como la más «intelectual». La señora Keyes, la segunda del grupo, era esposa de un oficial del Cuerpo de Ingenieros del Ejército de Estados Unidos, y como en nuestro relato no volverá aparecer, es suficiente con decir que era en efecto muy bonita y que servía de adorno en los distintos destinos militares, situados principalmente en el poco refinado oeste, a los que, para enorme disgusto suyo, se veía sucesivamente relegado su marido. Lilian se había casado con un abogado de Nueva York, un joven de voz potente y lleno de entusiasmo por su profesión; no era un gran partido, como tampoco lo era el de Edith, pero en alguna ocasión se había comentado que Lilian podía considerarse una joven afortunada por el simple hecho de casarse, ya que era mucho menos agraciada que sus hermanas. Sin embargo, era muy feliz, y ahora, como madre de dos pequeños tiranos y señora de una casita de piedra rojiza brownstone, encajonada como a la fuerza en la calle Cincuenta y tres, parecía encontrar su situación tan exultante como la más audaz de las fugas. Era robusta y de baja estatura, y si bien su figura se ponía en tela de juicio, se le reconocía presencia, aunque no majestad. Además, a decir de la gente, había mejorado desde la boda, y las dos cosas en la vida de las que estaba más segura eran la vehemencia de su marido en las discusiones y la originalidad de su hermana Isabel.

—Jamás he sido capaz de seguir el ritmo de Isabel: no me habría quedado tiempo para otra cosa —había comentado en más de una ocasión, pese a lo cual, no obstante, siempre la tenía presente con cierta nostalgia; y la vigilaba como una maternal spaniel haría con un galgo en libertad—. Quiero verla felizmente casada, eso es lo que quiero ver.

—Pues yo, por mi parte, no tendría ningún deseo especial de casarla.

Edmund Ludlow estaba acostumbrado a responder en un tono fuertemente audible.

—Sé que lo dices por discutir; siempre me llevas la contraria. No sé qué es lo que tienes en su contra, como no sea su originalidad.

—Es que no me gustan los originales; me gustan las traducciones —había respondido el señor Ludlow en más de una ocasión—. Isabel está escrita en un idioma extranjero. Yo no la entiendo. Debería casarse con un armenio o un portugués.

—¡Eso es precisamente lo que me da miedo que haga! —exclamó Lilian, que creía a Isabel capaz de cualquier cosa.

Lilian escuchó con enorme interés el relato que su hermana le hizo de la aparición de la señora Touchett, y al caer la noche se dispuso a acatar las órdenes de su tía. De lo que Isabel dijo más tarde no queda constancia, pero sin duda fueron las palabras de su hermana las que indujeron a Lilian a decirle a su marido cuando ambos se estaban arreglando para la visita:

—Espero de todo corazón que haga algo bueno por Isabel; está claro que la ha dejado prendada.

—¿Y qué quieres que haga? —preguntó Edmund Ludlow—. ¿Que le dé un buen regalo?

—No, claro que no; nada por el estilo, sino que se interese por ella, que la comprenda. Está claro que es la persona adecuada para apreciar a alguien como Isabel. Ha vivido mucho tiempo en compañía de extranjeros; se lo ha contado todo a Isabel. Y tú siempre has sido de la opinión de que Isabel tiene mucho de extranjera.

—Y tú quieres que le dé un poco de comprensión foránea, ¿eh? ¿No crees que aquí reciba la suficiente?

—Es que debería viajar al extranjero —dijo la señora Ludlow—. Es la persona adecuada para ir al extranjero.

—Y quieres que la anciana dama se la lleve con ella, ¿no es así?

—Se ha ofrecido a llevarla, se muere por que Isabel vaya. Pero lo que yo quiero es que cuando lleguen allí, le ofrezca a Isabel todas las ventajas. Estoy segura de que lo único que tenemos que hacer —afirmó la señora Ludlow— es darle la oportunidad.

—¿La oportunidad de qué?

—La oportunidad de perfeccionarse.

—¡Dios nos libre! —exclamó Edmund Ludlow—. ¡Que no se perfeccione más, por favor!

—Si no supiese que eso lo dices solo por discutir, me sentaría fatal —respondió su mujer—. Pero tú sabes que la

quieres.

—¿Sabes que te quiero? —preguntó el joven, en tono de broma, a Isabel un poco más tarde mientras se cepillaba el sombrero.

—¡Lo que sé es que me trae completamente sin cuidado! —exclamó la joven, con una voz y una sonrisa que, sin embargo, desmentían el desdén de sus palabras.

—Vaya, qué importante se siente desde la visita de la señora Touchett —dijo su hermana.

Pero Isabel rebatió el comentario con mucha seriedad.

—No digas eso, Lily. No me siento nada importante.

—Si eso no es malo —le aseguró Lily, siempre conciliadora.

—Ya, pero la visita de la señora Touchett no es motivo para sentirse así.

—Ah —exclamó Ludlow—, ¡se siente más importante que nunca!

—Si alguna vez me siento importante —declaró la joven—, será por mejores razones.

Fuera como fuese, lo cierto es que se sentía distinta, como si algo le hubiese sucedido. Cuando esa noche se quedó sola, se sentó un rato a la luz de la lámpara, con las manos vacías, sin ocuparse en sus distracciones habituales. Después se levantó y se puso a dar vueltas por la habitación, y fue de una estancia a otra, prefiriendo aquellos lugares en los que la luz era difusa y estaba a punto de extinguirse. Se sentía intranquila, agitada incluso; por momentos la recorría un leve temblor. La importancia de lo sucedido no guardaba proporción con el hecho en sí: su vida había dado un auténtico vuelco. Lo que vendría a partir de ahora resultaba aún demasiado impreciso; pero Isabel estaba en una situación que hacía que cualquier cambio cobrase importancia. Sentía el deseo de dejar atrás el pasado y, como se decía a sí misma, empezar de nuevo. Dicho deseo no era en absoluto fruto de lo ocurrido ese día; era algo tan familiar como el sonido de la lluvia en el cristal y la había empujado a empezar de cero en numerosas ocasiones. Cerró los ojos y tomó asiento en uno de los rincones en penumbra del silencioso salón, pero no lo hizo movida por el deseo de quedarse adormilada para olvidar. Por el contrario, se encontraba demasiado despierta y deseaba dominar aquella sensación de estar viendo demasiadas cosas a la vez. Su imaginación era, por la fuerza del hábito, activa hasta el absurdo; cuando la puerta no estaba abierta, saltaba por la ventana. No estaba en absoluto acostumbrada a mantenerla aherrojada; y en los momentos importantes, cuando habría agradecido utilizar tan solo el juicio, pagaba las consecuencias de haber dado demasiadas alas a la facultad de ver sin enjuiciar. En aquel momento, dominada por la sensación de que se había producido el anuncio de un cambio, se vio invadida poco a poco por un sinfín de imágenes de las cosas que iba a dejar atrás. Los días y las horas vividos volvieron a ella, y durante largo rato, en medio de un silencio solo interrumpido por el tictac del gran reloj de bronce, pasó revista de ellos. Había sido una vida muy feliz y ella una persona muy afortunada: esa era la certeza que parecía emerger con más nitidez. Había tenido a su alcance todo lo mejor, y en un mundo en el que las circunstancias de tantos eran tan poco envidiables era una ventaja no haber presenciado jamás nada especialmente desagradable. A Isabel se le antojó que lo desagradable había estado incluso demasiado ausente de su experiencia, puesto que, por su relación con la literatura, sabía que con frecuencia constituía una fuente de interés e incluso de aprendizaje. Su padre la había mantenido alejada todo de ello… su apuesto y adorado padre, que siempre había demostrado tanta aversión hacia lo desagradable. Suponía una gran felicidad haber sido hija suya; Isabel se sentía verdaderamente orgullosa de su progenitor. Tras su muerte, creyó entender que lo que su padre había hecho era mostrar a sus hijas su lado más valiente, pero que en la práctica no había logrado eludir la parte mala, como era su aspiración. Sin embargo, eso no hizo sino aumentar la ternura que él le inspiraba; no resultaba ni siquiera doloroso haberlo considerado generoso en demasía, demasiado bondadoso, demasiado indiferente a las intenciones sórdidas. Mucha gente sostenía que llevaba demasiado lejos tal indiferencia, sobre todo el gran número de personas a las que debía dinero. De tales opiniones Isabel nunca fue informada con claridad; no obstante, puede que al lector le resulte interesante saber que, si bien reconocían que el señor Archer era poseedor de una cabeza privilegiada y de unos modales cautivadores (de hecho, como uno de ellos había comentado, siempre estaba «cautivando» algo), habían declarado que hacía muy mal uso de su vida. Había dilapidado una considerable fortuna, sus relaciones sociales eran deplorables, y era conocido como un jugador empedernido. Unos cuantos críticos acérrimos iban más allá y afirmaban que ni siquiera había sabido educar a sus hijas. No habían recibido la educación apropiada ni habían contado con un hogar permanente: habían sido al mismo tiempo malcriadas y desatendidas; y o bien se las había dejado en manos de niñeras e institutrices (casi siempre muy malas) o habían sido enviadas a colegios frívolos, dirigidos por franceses, de los que, al cabo un mes, se las habían llevado hechas un mar de lágrimas. Este punto de vista de la cuestión habría suscitado la indignación de Isabel, porque a su

modo de ver había gozado de grandes oportunidades. Incluso cuando su padre había abandonado a las niñas durante tres meses en Neufchatel al cuidado de una *bonne* francesa que se había fugado con un aristócrata ruso alojado en el mismo hotel. Ni siquiera en aquella situación irregular (el incidente había ocurrido cuando ella contaba once años) había experimentado miedo ni vergüenza, sino que, debido a su educación liberal, lo había considerado un episodio romántico. Su padre tenía una visión muy amplia de la vida, de la que daban prueba su inquietud constante y la incoherencia de conducta que en ocasiones mostraba. Su deseo era que sus hijas, incluso de niñas, viesen cuanto fuese posible del mundo. Con tal propósito, antes de que Isabel cumpliese los catorce, las había llevado a cruzar ya tres veces el Atlántico, aunque en cada una de esas ocasiones no les había concedido más que unos cuantos meses para disfrutar del objetivo propuesto, un proceder que había despertado la curiosidad de nuestra heroína sin permitirle satisfacerla. Isabel debió de haber sido la más fiel adepta de su padre, puesto que, del trío, era la que más le «compensaba» por aquellas situaciones desagradables que él jamás mencionaba. En los últimos días de su vida, el deseo de abandonar un mundo en el que la dificultad de hacer lo que a uno le apetecía parecía ir en aumento con la edad se había visto en gran medida contrarrestado por el dolor de separarse de una hija tan inteligente, tan notable y superior. Más tarde, cuando cesaron los viajes a Europa, él continuó concediendo a sus hijas todo tipo de caprichos, y aunque estuviese inmerso en dificultades económicas, jamás hubo nada que alterase la irreflexiva certeza que ellas tenían de encontrarse en posesión de muchas cosas. Isabel, pese a bailar muy bien, no conservaba recuerdo alguno de haber destacado en los ambientes coreográficos de Nueva York; su hermana Edith, a decir de todos, resultaba muchísimo más atractiva. Edith constituía un ejemplo tan claro de éxito que Isabel no podía seguir albergando ilusiones acerca de lo que era necesario para obtener semejante distinción, ni tampoco acerca de su propia capacidad de saltar, brincar, dar gritos… sobre todo, para alcanzar el efecto deseado. Diecinueve de cada veinte personas (entre ellas su propia hermana menor) declaraban que Edith era con mucho la más guapa de las dos; pero la que hacía el número veinte, además de opinar lo contrario, se complacía en pensar que todos los demás eran unos estetas vulgares. Isabel sentía en lo más profundo de su ser un deseo de complacer incluso más insaciable que el de Edith; sin embargo, las profundidades del ser de esta joven dama se hallaban en un lugar muy inaccesible, y entre el mismo y la superficie, la comunicación se veía obstaculizada por una decena de fuerzas caprichosas. Veía cómo los jóvenes acudían en tropel a visitar a su hermana; pero, en general, sentían miedo de Isabel; tenían el convencimiento de que para hablar con ella necesitaban de una preparación especial. Una reputación de lectora empedernida la rodeaba como la envoltura nebulosa de una diosa de epopeya; se daba por supuesto que esa cualidad engendraba preguntas difíciles y hacía que la conversación con ella resultase un tanto fría. A la pobre muchacha le agradaba que la considerasen inteligente, pero odiaba que la tomasen por un ratón de biblioteca; acostumbraba a leer a escondidas y, pese a gozar de excelente memoria, se abstenía de hacer citas pedantes. Tenía una enorme ansia de saber, pero en realidad prefería casi cualquier otra fuente de información a la página impresa: sentía una curiosidad inmensa ante la vida, todo lo observaba y de todo se maravillaba. Guardaba en su interior una gran reserva vital, y obtenía el placer más intenso al experimentar la relación existente entre los impulsos de su propio espíritu y las convulsiones del mundo exterior. Por dicho motivo, disfrutaba al ver las grandes muchedumbres y las vastas extensiones de un país, al leer acerca de guerras y revoluciones, al contemplar cuadros históricos, empeños estos que la habían empujado con frecuencia a cometer conscientemente el error de perdonar mucha mala pintura en aras del asunto que reflejaba. En tiempos de la guerra de Secesión era todavía muy pequeña; pero pasó meses de aquel largo período en un estado de entusiasmo casi apasionado, durante el que en ocasiones (para gran confusión suya) se sintió conmovida casi de forma indiscriminada por el valor de uno u otro ejército. Naturalmente, la cautela de aquellos suspicaces jóvenes nunca había llegado tan lejos como para convertirla en una proscrita social; puesto que el número de aquellos cuyos corazones, cuando se aproximaban a ella, latían a un ritmo que les recordaba que también tenían cabeza, le había impedido familiarizarse con las excelsas disciplinas propias de su sexo y su edad. Había contado con cuanto una joven podía apetecer: cariño, admiración, dulces, flores, la sensación de no carecer de ninguno de los privilegios del mundo en que vivía, abundantes oportunidades de bailar, infinidad de vestidos que estrenar, la revista *Spectator* de Londres, las últimas publicaciones, la música de Gounod, la poesía de Browning, la prosa de George Eliot.

Ahora todas estas cosas, a medida que la memoria las evocaba, se transformaban en un sinnúmero de escenas y personajes. Recuperó cosas olvidadas; muchas otras, que últimamente había considerado de enorme importancia, desaparecieron de su mente. El resultado fue una especie de caleidoscopio, pero los giros de dicho instrumento se vieron finalmente interrumpidos por la llegada de la criada, que anunció la visita de un caballero. El nombre del caballero era Caspar Goodwood. Se trataba de un joven cabal de Boston, que conocía a la señorita Archer desde hacía

doce meses y que, al considerarla la joven más bella de su tiempo, había dictaminado que aquella época, según el criterio al que antes he aludido, constituía un período de la historia necio a más no poder. Le había escrito de vez en cuando, y hacía una o dos semanas lo había hecho desde Nueva York. Isabel había pensado que era muy posible que fuese a visitarla; de hecho, durante todo aquel lluvioso día lo había estado esperando vagamente. Ahora que sabía que se encontraba allí, sin embargo, no sentía grandes deseos de recibirlo. Era el joven más atractivo que jamás había visto, sin duda un joven espléndido, que inspiraba en ella un raro sentimiento de gran respeto. Nunca había experimentado algo así por ninguna otra persona. Todo el mundo en general era de la opinión de que deseaba casarse con ella, pero, por supuesto, eso era algo que quedaba entre ellos. Lo que sí cabe al menos afirmar es que el joven había hecho el viaje de Nueva York hasta Albany expresamente para verla, tras haberse enterado en aquella ciudad, en la que había estado pasando unos días y había esperado encontrarse con ella, de que la joven se encontraba todavía en la capital del estado. Isabel retrasó unos minutos el momento de ir a verle; anduvo de un lado a otro de la habitación, con la sensación de hallarse ante nuevas complicaciones. Pero al fin acudió a su encuentro y lo halló de pie junto a la lámpara. Era alto, fuerte y un tanto envarado; era además esbelto y moreno. No era apuesto en sentido romántico, sino de una belleza un tanto turbia; pero había algo en su fisonomía que atraía la atención, atención que se veía recompensada en función del encanto que uno encontrara en los ojos azules de increíble fijeza, que no parecían pertenecer a una tez del color de la suya, y en una mandíbula de esa forma un tanto angulosa que suele ir asociada a un temperamento resuelto. Isabel se dijo para sus adentros que esa noche su barbilla denotaba resolución; pese a lo cual, media hora después, Caspar Goodwood, que aparte de resuelto había llegado allí esperanzado, regresaba a su alojamiento con la sensación de ser un hombre derrotado. Y no era, cabría añadir, un hombre que aceptase la derrota así como así.

5

Ralph Touchett era un filósofo, pero aun así llamó a la puerta de su madre (a las siete menos cuarto) con una gran dosis de ansiedad. Hasta los filósofos tienen sus preferencias, y hay que reconocer que de sus progenitores era el padre el que mejor se correspondía con su idea del encanto de la dependencia filial. Su padre, como a menudo se decía para sus adentros, era quien se mostraba más maternal de los dos; su madre, por otro lado, era paternal, e incluso, para decirlo en la jerga al uso, mangoneadora. No obstante, sentía enorme afecto por su único hijo y siempre había insistido en que pasase tres meses al año en su compañía. Ralph correspondía con toda justicia a su afecto y sabía que, en los pensamientos de su madre y en aquella vida suya tan organizada y estructurada, a él invariablemente le correspondía el turno inmediatamente posterior al de aquellos otros asuntos que reclamaban su atención inmediata, a todas aquellas puntualizaciones necesarias para que funcionasen a la perfección los engranajes de su voluntad. Ralph la encontró ya arreglada para la cena, pero abrazó a su hijo sin quitarse los guantes y le hizo tomar asiento a su lado en el sofá. Se interesó concienzudamente por la salud de su marido y por la del propio joven, y, al obtener una información muy poco alentadora sobre ambas, observó que estaba más convencida que nunca del acierto de su decisión de no exponerse al clima inglés. De haberlo hecho, es posible que ella también se sintiese débil. Ralph sonrió al imaginarse a su madre débil, pero no se molestó en recordarle que sus dolencias no eran resultado del clima inglés, ya que se pasaba gran parte del año alejado del mismo.

Él había sido un niño de corta edad cuando su padre, Daniel Tracy Touchett, oriundo de Rutland, en el estado de Vermont, llegó a Inglaterra como socio minoritario de un banco del que unos diez años más tarde logró control predominante. Daniel Touchett comprendió que tenía ante sí una estancia de por vida en su país de adopción y, desde el principio, mantuvo con respecto al mismo una actitud sencilla, juiciosa y transigente. No obstante, como se dijo a sí mismo, no tenía intención de renunciar a sus raíces estadounidenses, ni tampoco de enseñarle a su único hijo arte tan sutil. El problema de integrarse a la vida de Inglaterra le había resultado de tan fácil solución, aun sin llegar a ser un converso, que le parecía igual de sencillo que su heredero legal se encargase tras su muerte de dar continuidad a aquella banca antigua y gris con la luminosa claridad de su país natal. Con todo se esforzó en intensificar dicha claridad, y envió al muchacho a educarse a Estados Unidos. Ralph asistió durante varios trimestres a un colegio en Estados Unidos y se licenció en una universidad de allí, tras lo cual, cuando a la vuelta su padre lo encontró nativo en exceso, fue enviado a estudiar tres años en Oxford. Oxford pudo con Harvard, y al final Ralph se volvió lo suficientemente inglés. Su aparente conformidad con las maneras del entorno no era, sin embargo, sino una máscara tras la que se escondía una mente que disfrutaba enormemente de su independencia, en la que nada permanente lograba imponerse, y que, con inclinación natural a la aventura y la ironía, se permitía una libertad de opinión sin límites. Comenzó siendo un joven muy prometedor; en Oxford, para enorme satisfacción de su padre, descolló y la gente de su alrededor afirmaba que era una verdadera lástima que a un joven tan inteligente se le negase la posibilidad de hacer carrera. Puede que de haber regresado a su país hubiese disfrutado de tal oportunidad (aunque este punto está rodeado de incertidumbre), pero incluso en el supuesto de que el señor Touchett hubiese accedido de buen grado a separarse de él (que no era el caso), a Ralph le habría resultado muy difícil interponer de forma permanente todo aquel océano entre él y ese anciano al que consideraba su mejor amigo. Ralph no solo quería a su padre, lo admiraba y disfrutaba cuando tenía la oportunidad de observarlo. Daniel Touchett, en su opinión, era un genio, y pese a que él carecía de aptitudes para los misterios de la banca, se propuso aprender lo suficiente para poder equipararse a la importante figura que su padre había representado en ella. Sin embargo, no era eso lo que más admiraba en él, sino aquella superficie marfileña, como pulimentada por el aire inglés, que el anciano había opuesto a cualquier intento de penetración. Daniel Touchett no había estudiado ni en Harvard ni en Oxford, y solo a él podía culparse de haber depositado en manos de su hijo las claves de la crítica moderna. Ralph, cuya mente estaba repleta de ideas que su padre jamás habría adivinado, tenía en gran estima la originalidad de este. Los estadounidenses, con razón o sin ella, son muy apreciados por la facilidad con la que se pliegan a las condiciones de otro país; pero el señor Touchett había logrado que en los propios límites de su adaptabilidad residiese en gran parte la razón de su éxito general. Había conservado con toda su frescura la mayoría de sus rasgos primigenios; su acento, como el hijo siempre

observaba con placer, era el propio de las regiones más exuberantes de Nueva Inglaterra. Al final de su vida había llegado a ser, en su propio terreno, tan apacible como rico; combinaba una perspicacia consumada con una disposición superficial a confraternizar, y su «posición social», que jamás le había importado lo más mínimo, conservaba la turgencia perfecta de una fruta que nadie ha manoseado. Quizá fuese debido a la ausencia de imaginación y de lo que ha venido en denominarse conciencia histórica, pero su percepción estaba completamente cerrada a muchas de las impresiones que la vida inglesa produce en el forastero culto. Existían ciertas diferencias que nunca había percibido, ciertos hábitos que jamás había adquirido, ciertos misterios en los que nunca se había adentrado. En lo que a estos últimos se refiere, si algún día hubiera indagado en ellos su hijo no habría tenido tan buena opinión de él.

Ralph, tras dejar Oxford, había dedicado un par de años a viajar, después de lo cual se había visto encaramado a un alto taburete del banco de su padre. La responsabilidad de tales puestos y el honor que representan, en mi opinión, no se miden por la altura del taburete, que responde a consideraciones de otra índole: a Ralph, que de hecho tenía las piernas muy largas, le gustaba estar de pie en el trabajo o moverse de un lado a otro. A este ejercicio, sin embargo, se vio forzado a dedicar solo un breve período de tiempo, ya que después de un año y medio se percató de que tenía problemas graves de salud. Había cogido un fortísimo resfriado, que se había alojado en sus pulmones y había hecho verdaderos estragos en ellos. Se vio obligado a dejar de trabajar y a cumplir a rajatabla con la penosa obligación de cuidarse. Al principio no se aplicó mucho; tenía la impresión de que no era de sí mismo en absoluto de quien estaba cuidando, sino de otra persona carente de interés y atractivo, con la que no tenía nada en común. Esa persona, sin embargo, mejoró al ir conociéndola, y Ralph alcanzó finalmente a mostrar a regañadientes cierta tolerancia hacia ella, e incluso un respeto contenido. El infortunio engendra extrañas complicidades, y nuestro joven, sabedor de que en aquel empeño se jugaba algo (generalmente pensaba que su reputación de ingenioso), dedicó a su tosco pupilo una atención considerable que fue debidamente apreciada y que al menos surtió el efecto de mantener con vida a aquel pobre diablo. Uno de sus pulmones empezó a sanar, el otro prometía seguir el ejemplo, y se le aseguró que podría resistir otros doce inviernos si se trasladaba a los climas donde suelen refugiarse los tísicos. Como había llegado a sentir enorme aprecio por la ciudad de Londres, maldijo la monotonía de aquel exilio; pero, al tiempo que lo maldecía, se fue adaptando, y poco a poco, al descubrir que aquel organismo suyo tan sensible agradecía los favores hasta si se hacían de mala gana, empezó a concedérselos de mejor grado. Hibernaba en el extranjero, como suele decirse: tomaba el sol, se quedaba en casa cuando hacía viento, se metía en la cama si llovía, y en un par de ocasiones en que había nevado durante la noche, ni siquiera volvió a levantarse.

Una secreta reserva de indiferencia (como un trozo grande de pastel que una anciana niñera cariñosa hubiese metido a hurtadillas en el bolsillo de su primer uniforme escolar) vino en su auxilio y le ayudó a reconciliarse con el sacrificio, puesto que, en el mejor de los casos, estaba demasiado enfermo para todo lo que no fuese aquella ardua tarea. Como se decía a sí mismo, en realidad no había nada que le hubiese apetecido mucho hacer, de manera que por lo menos no desertó ni abandonó el campo de batalla. En el momento presente, sin embargo, la fragancia del fruto prohibido parecía en ocasiones flotar a su alrededor y recordarle que el mayor de los placeres es entrar en acción. Vivir como él lo hacía era como leer un buen libro en una mala traducción, pasatiempo mezquino para un joven convencido de que podría haber sido un lingüista excelente. Pasaba inviernos buenos e inviernos malos, y en el transcurso de los primeros fue presa a veces de la ilusión de una recuperación casi total. Sin embargo, dicha ilusión se esfumó unos tres años antes de que ocurriesen los hechos con los que se inicia este relato: en esa ocasión se había quedado en Inglaterra hasta más tarde de lo habitual y el mal tiempo le había sorprendido antes de arribar a Argel. Llegó más muerto que vivo y permaneció allí varias semanas debatiéndose entre la vida y la muerte. Su convalecencia fue un auténtico milagro, pero la primera lección que de ella extrajo fue que milagros así solo ocurren una vez. Se dijo a sí mismo que su hora no estaba lejos y que le convenía tenerlo muy en cuenta, aunque también se le ofrecía la oportunidad de pasar el tiempo que le restaba del mejor modo posible siempre en la medida de sus posibilidades. Ante la perspectiva de perderlas, el simple uso de sus facultades se convirtió en un placer infinito; le pareció que el gozo de la contemplación jamás había sido explorado. Lejos quedaban los tiempos en los que le había resultado arduo verse obligado a renunciar a la idea de sobresalir, una idea no menos incómoda por su vaguedad ni menos placentera por haber tenido que enfrentarse a la vez con accesos de ejemplar autocrítica. Sus amigos lo encontraban ahora más alegre, y lo atribuían a la teoría, ante la que asentían con complicidad, de que iba a recobrar la salud. Pero aquella serenidad no era sino un manto de flores silvestres que crecía sobre su ruina.

Es muy probable que fuese esa sabrosa cualidad de la cosa contemplada en sí misma lo que contribuyó al súbito

interés que despertó en Ralph la llegada de una joven que, a todas luces, de insípida no tenía nada. Algo le decía que, si mostraba la disposición adecuada, allí encontraría suficiente ocupación para infinidad de días. Cabría añadir, de forma somera, que la idea de amar, a diferencia de la de ser amado, tenía todavía sitio en su reducido esquema. Tan solo se había prohibido a sí mismo el derroche de su manifestación. No obstante, ni él debía inspirar pasión alguna en su prima ni ella, aunque lo intentase, debía despertarla en él.

—Y ahora, háblame de la joven —le dijo a su madre—. ¿Cuáles son tus intenciones con respecto a ella?

La respuesta de la señora Touchett no se hizo esperar.

—Mi intención es pedirle a tu padre que la invite a quedarse tres o cuatro semanas en Gardencourt.

—No es necesaria tanta ceremonia —dijo Ralph—. Mi padre la invitará como la cosa más natural.

—Yo no estoy tan segura. Es mi sobrina, no la suya.

—¡Por Dios bendito, querida madre! ¡Menudo sentido de la propiedad! Esa es aún más razón para que la invite. Pero después de eso… me refiero a dentro de unos tres meses, porque sería absurdo invitar a la pobre muchacha a quedarse solo tres o cuatro míseras semanas, ¿qué te propones hacer con ella?

—Me propongo llevarla a París. Me propongo comprarle ropa.

—Ya, claro, eso por supuesto. ¿Y aparte de eso?

—La invitaré a pasar el otoño conmigo en Florencia.

—Te quedas en los detalles, querida madre —dijo Ralph—. Lo que quiero saber es qué te propones hacer con ella en general.

—¡Cumplir con mi deber! —declaró la señora Touchett—. Supongo que sientes mucha lástima por ella —añadió.

—No, no creo que sienta lástima por ella. No me da la impresión de que invite a la compasión. Creo que la envidio. Antes de asegurarlo, sin embargo, dame una pista de dónde crees que reside tu deber.

—En mostrarle cuatro países de Europa… la dejaré que elija dos, y en darle la oportunidad de perfeccionar su francés, que ya conoce muy bien.

Ralph frunció ligeramente el entrecejo.

—Eso suena bastante árido, incluso si le permites escoger dos de los países.

—Si te resulta árido —dijo su madre con una carcajada—, te aseguro que Isabel se encargará de que florezca. Es como lluvia de mayo, te lo aseguro.

—¿Quieres decir que es un ser excepcional?

—Yo no sé si es excepcional o no, pero es una joven inteligente, con voluntad propia y fuerte temperamento. No conoce el aburrimiento.

—Me lo imagino —dijo Ralph, para después añadir con brusquedad—: ¿Cómo os lleváis entre vosotras?

—¿Quieres decir con eso que yo soy una aburrida? No creo que ella piense eso de mí. Ya sé que para algunas jóvenes podría serlo, pero Isabel es demasiado inteligente para pensarlo. Creo que se divierte muchísimo conmigo. Nos llevamos bien porque yo la entiendo; sé la clase de joven que es. Es muy franca, y yo también lo soy: ambas sabemos lo que cada una puede esperar de la otra.

—¡Sí, querida madre —exclamó Ralph—, uno siempre sabe qué se puede esperar de ti! Solo me has sorprendido una vez, y ha sido hoy, haciéndome el regalo de una bonita prima cuya existencia ni siquiera sospechaba.

—¿Tan guapa la encuentras?

—Muy guapa, sin duda, pero eso no es lo principal. Lo que me llama la atención en ella es ese aire de ser alguien especial. ¿Quién es esa criatura tan insólita, qué es? ¿Dónde la has encontrado, y cómo la has conocido?

—La encontré en una vieja casa de Albany, sentada en una habitación deprimente en una tarde lluviosa, leyendo un pesado libro y aburriéndose como una ostra. Ella no sabía lo aburrida que estaba, pero cuando la dejé, no me cabe la menor duda, parecía muy agradecida del favor que le había hecho. Me dirás que no tenía que haberla espabilado, que debería haberla dejado en paz. Y quizá estés en lo cierto, pero yo actué en conciencia; pensé que se merecía algo mejor. Se me ocurrió que sería una buena obra llevármela de viaje y hacer que conociera mundo. Ella se cree que sabe mucho de él, como la mayoría de las jóvenes estadounidenses; pero al igual que todas ellas, se equivoca de punto a punto. Por si te interesa, te diré que pensé que me haría quedar en buen lugar. Me gusta causar buena impresión, y para una mujer de mi edad no hay mayor ventaja, en ese aspecto, que una sobrina atractiva. Tú sabes que hacía años que no tenía noticia de las hijas de mi hermana; desaprobaba por completo la conducta del padre. Pero siempre tuve la intención de hacer algo por ellas cuando a él le llegase su hora. Averigüé dónde podía encontrarlas y, sin más preámbulos, fui y me presenté. Hay otras dos hermanas, ambas casadas, pero solo conocí a la

mayor, quien, por cierto, tiene un marido de lo más descortés. A su mujer, que se llama Lily, le entusiasmó la idea de que yo me interesase por Isabel; dijo que eso era justo lo que su hermana necesitaba, que alguien se tomara interés por ella. Me habló de Isabel como se habla de un joven genio, necesitado de aliento y protección. Tal vez sea cierto que es un genio, pero de ser así, todavía no he descubierto su talento especial. La señora Ludlow se mostró ciertamente entusiasmada con mi idea de traérmela a Europa; allá todos ven Europa como una tierra de promisión, de salvación, como un refugio para su exceso de población. La propia Isabel parecía muy contenta de venir, y todo se arregló fácilmente. Surgió un pequeño contratiempo en lo relativo al dinero, ya que se mostraba reacia a cualquier tipo de dependencia económica. Pero cuenta con una pequeña renta, y se cree que es ella la que corre con los gastos de su viaje.

Ralph había escuchado con atención aquel informe tan juicioso, que no mitigó su interés por la protagonista del mismo.

—Pues si es un genio —dijo—, debemos descubrir su talento especial. ¿No será, por casualidad, el coqueteo?

—No lo creo. En un principio, puede que te lo parezca, pero te equivocarías. No creo que te resulte muy fácil acertar con ella.

—¡Entonces Warburton se equivoca! —exclamó Ralph con regocijo—. Él se jacta de haber descubierto precisamente eso.

La madre negó con la cabeza.

—Lord Warburton no la entenderá. Que no se moleste en intentarlo.

—Él es muy inteligente —afirmó Ralph—, pero no le vendrá mal sentirse desconcertado de vez en cuando.

—A Isabel le va a encantar desconcertar a todo un lord —observó la señora Touchett.

Su hijo frunció ligeramente el ceño.

—¿Qué sabe ella de lores?

—Nada en absoluto, y eso lo desconcertará todavía más.

Ralph recibió aquellas palabras con una carcajada, y miró por la ventana. Luego preguntó:

—¿Es que no piensas bajar a ver a mi padre?

—A las ocho menos cuarto —respondió la señora Touchett.

El hijo consultó su reloj.

—En tal caso, te queda un cuarto de hora. Cuéntame más cosas de Isabel. —Y al negarse la señora Touchett a complacerle y decirle que era él quien tendría que averiguarlas, prosiguió—: Está bien, lo que es innegable es que te hará quedar bien. Pero ¿no crees que pueda causarte también algún quebradero de cabeza?

—Espero que no, pero si lo hace, no pienso escurrir el bulto. Jamás lo hago.

—A mí me parece que es muy natural —dijo Ralph.

—La gente natural no es la que causa los mayores quebraderos de cabeza.

—No —concedió Ralph—, y tú eres buena prueba de ello. Eres extremadamente natural, y estoy seguro de que jamás le has causado problemas a nadie. Tendrías que esforzarte mucho para hacerlo. Pero dime una cosa que se me acaba de ocurrir: ¿es capaz Isabel de mostrarse desagradable?

—Ah —gritó la madre—, ¡cuántas preguntas haces! Averígualo tú mismo.

Las preguntas de Ralph, sin embargo, no se habían agotado.

—En todo este tiempo no me has dicho aún qué es lo que te propones hacer con ella —dijo.

—¿Qué pienso hacer con ella? Hablas como si se tratara de un metro de percal. No voy hacer absolutamente nada con ella, y ella hará todo lo que le plazca. Ya me lo ha dejado claro.

—Entonces, ¿lo que querías decir en el telegrama era que tenía un carácter independiente?

—Nunca sé lo que quiero decir en mis telegramas, sobre todo en los que envío desde Estados Unidos. Expresarse con claridad resulta muy caro. Baja conmigo a ver a tu padre.

—Todavía no son las ocho menos cuarto —dijo Ralph.

—Pero sé que estará impaciente —respondió la señora Touchett.

Ralph tenía su propia opinión sobre la impaciencia de su padre; pero, sin chistar, le ofreció el brazo a su madre. Eso le confirió el poder de, mientras descendían juntos, hacer que se detuviera un momento en el rellano a mitad de la escalera, aquella escalinata ancha y de poca altura, con barandilla de roble oscurecido por el tiempo, que era una de los elementos arquitectónicos más sobresalientes de Gardencourt.

—¿No tienes planes de casarla? —preguntó sonriente.

—¿Casarla? ¡Lamentaría tener que jugarle tan mala pasada! Pero, por lo demás, ella es perfectamente capaz de casarse por sí misma. Tiene todo lo necesario para ello.

—¿Quieres decir que ya ha elegido marido?

—No sé si marido, pero hay un joven en Boston…

Ralph no la dejó continuar; no tenía ningún deseo de oír hablar del joven de Boston.

—Como dice mi padre, ¡siempre están comprometidas!

Su madre le había dicho que debía satisfacer su curiosidad en la propia fuente, y pronto resultó evidente que no le faltarían ocasiones de hacerlo. Tuvo mucho de lo que hablar con su joven pariente cuando los dejaron solos a ambos en el salón. Lord Warburton, que había llegado a caballo desde su casa, a unas diez millas de distancia, montó de nuevo y se marchó antes de la cena; y una hora después de terminada esta, el señor y la señora Touchett, que parecían haber agotado sus reservas de cortesías, se retiraron, con la válida excusa de la fatiga, a sus respectivos aposentos. El joven pasó una hora en compañía de su prima, quien, pese a haber estado viajando la mitad de la jornada, no daba muestras de sentirse cansada. En realidad, estaba agotada; era consciente de ello y sabía que lo pagaría al día siguiente, pero en esa época tenía por costumbre llevar el agotamiento hasta el extremo y confesarlo únicamente cuando le era imposible disimularlo. Por el momento, le era posible proceder con exquisita hipocresía, ya que era presa del interés; se sentía, como se dijo para sus adentros, flotando. Le pidió a Ralph que le mostrara los cuadros; había muchísimos en la casa, la mayoría elegidos por él. Los mejores estaban colgados en una galería revestida de roble, de encantadoras proporciones, en cuyos extremos había un par de saloncitos de estar y que por la noche se encontraba por lo general iluminada. La luz era insuficiente para apreciar bien las pinturas, y la visita podría haberse pospuesto para el día siguiente, tal como Ralph se había atrevido a sugerir; pero Isabel se había mostrado decepcionada, eso sí, sin perder la sonrisa, y había dicho:

—Si no tiene inconveniente, me gustaría verlos un momento.

Estaba ávida, sabía que era presa de la ansiedad y que ahora se le notaba; pero no podía evitarlo.

«No acepta sugerencias», se dijo Ralph para sus adentros, pero no se sintió irritado; encontró divertida aquella insistencia suya y hasta le complació. De trecho en trecho, había lámparas colocadas sobre unas ménsulas, y si bien la iluminación era imperfecta, el resultado era pasmoso. La luz caía sobre los difuminados cuadrados de vivos colores y el dorado descolorido de los gruesos marcos, y arrancaba brillos del suelo encerado de la galería. Ralph tomó una palmatoria y empezó a señalarle a Isabel las cosas que a él le gustaban; la joven fue mirando las pinturas una tras otra, entre pequeñas exclamaciones y murmullos. Resultaba evidente que era un buen juez y que poseía un gusto innato. Ralph quedó impresionado. Isabel tomó a su vez una vela y la fue acercando despacio a uno y otro cuadro; la levantó y, cuando lo hizo, Ralph se descubrió inmóvil en mitad de la galería y con la mirada puesta no tanto en los cuadros como en la figura de la joven. Lo cierto es que no se perdía nada al permitir que sus ojos se desviasen, ya que ella era mucho más merecedora de su atención que la mayoría de aquellas obras de arte. Era indiscutiblemente delgada, probablemente liviana e innegablemente alta; los que querían distinguirla de las otras dos hermanas Archer siempre la habían llamado la esbelta. Su cabellera, tan oscura que casi parecía negra, había sido objeto de la envidia de numerosas mujeres; los ojos gris claro, tal vez demasiado firmes en los momentos más graves, mostraban una encantadora tendencia a la aprobación. Los dos jóvenes recorrieron con calma un lado de la galería primero y después el otro, y a continuación ella dijo:

—Bueno, ahora ya sé más de lo que sabía al empezar.

—Por lo que veo, te apasiona el saber —respondió su primo.

—Eso creo; la mayoría de las jóvenes son de una ignorancia atroz.

—A mí me pareces muy distinta de la mayoría.

—Y muchas de ellas también podrían… ¡pero hay que ver cómo se habla de ellas…! —exclamó Isabel, que prefería no centrarse en sí misma por el momento. Luego, de pronto, cambió de asunto y añadió—: Dime, por favor, ¿no tenéis un fantasma?

—¿Un fantasma?

—Un espectro en el castillo, algo que se aparece. En Estados Unidos los llamamos fantasmas.

—Y aquí nosotros también, cuando los vemos.

—Entonces, ¿los veis? Debería ser así, en esta casa antigua y romántica.

—No es una casa antigua y romántica —dijo Ralph—. Te llevarás un desengaño si cuentas con ello. Es prosaica hasta el desaliento; aquí no hay más romanticismo que el que tú hayas traído contigo.

—Yo he traído mucho; y me parece que lo he traído al lugar adecuado.

—Para tenerlo a buen recaudo, sin duda; aquí no podrá pasarle nada, con mi padre y conmigo.

Isabel lo miró un instante.

—¿Es que nunca hay nadie más aquí, aparte de ti y de tu padre?

—Mi madre, por supuesto.

—Ya conozco a tu madre, y no es nada romántica. ¿No suele venir más gente?

—Muy poca.

—Pues lo siento, a mí me encanta ver gente.

—Pues invitaremos a todo el condado para entretenerte —dijo Ralph.

—Te estás burlando de mí —respondió la joven un tanto seria—. ¿Quién era el caballero que estaba en el jardín cuando llegué?

—Un vecino del condado. No viene con mucha frecuencia.

—¡Qué lástima! Me resultó muy agradable.

—¿Sí? A mí me pareció que apenas le dirigías la palabra —repuso Ralph.

—Eso no tiene nada que ver, me gustó de todos modos. También me gusta tu padre, muchísimo.

—En eso sí que aciertas. Es el hombre más encantador del mundo.

—Siento mucho que esté enfermo.

—Tienes que ayudarme a cuidarlo. Seguro que eres buena enfermera.

—No lo creo. Me han dicho que no lo soy. Dicen que tengo demasiadas teorías. Pero todavía no me has hablado de los fantasmas —añadió.

Ralph, sin embargo, hizo caso omiso de dicha observación.

—Te gusta mi padre y te gusta lord Warburton. También deduzco que te gusta mi madre.

—Tu madre me gusta muchísimo, porque… porque…

E Isabel se encontró tratando de encontrar la razón de su afecto hacia la señora Touchett.

—¡Ah, nunca sabemos el porqué! —dijo su interlocutor, entre risas.

—Yo sí que conozco el porqué —respondió la joven—. Es porque jamás espera gustarle a nadie. Y le trae sin cuidado que sea o no así.

—Así que la adoras… ¿por motivos perversos? Pues yo me parezco muchísimo a mi madre.

—A mí no me parece que sea así. Tú deseas gustarle a la gente, y haces lo posible por lograrlo.

—¡Santo Dios, cómo lo calas a uno! —exclamó Ralph con una consternación que no era del todo fingida.

—Pero me gustas igualmente —continuó su prima—. Y lo mejor para confirmarme en ello será que me enseñes el fantasma.

Ralph negó con la cabeza, con aire desolado.

—Podría mostrártelo, pero nunca lo verías. No todos tienen el privilegio; y tampoco es algo envidiable. Jamás lo ha visto una persona joven, feliz e inocente como tú. Antes es necesario haber sufrido, haber sufrido enormemente, haber adquirido cierto conocimiento del dolor. Esa es la manera de que los ojos se abran a su visión. Yo lo vi hace mucho tiempo —dijo Ralph.

—Como te acabo de decir, a mí me gusta mucho aprender —respondió Isabel.

—Sí, aprender cosas alegres, agradables. Pero tú no has sufrido, ni estás hecha para sufrir. Espero que jamás veas al fantasma.

Isabel lo había estado escuchando con atención, con una sonrisa en los labios, pero con cierta seriedad en la mirada. Pese a encontrarla encantadora, a Ralph le parecía un tanto presuntuosa, algo que sin duda formaba parte de su encanto, y se preguntó qué iba a decir.

—Yo no tengo miedo, ¿sabes? —dijo, y Ralph encontró la frase harto presuntuosa.

—¿No tienes miedo al sufrimiento?

—Sí, claro que me da miedo el sufrimiento. Pero no me dan miedo los fantasmas. Y creo que la gente sufre con demasiada facilidad —añadió.

—No creo que sea tu caso —dijo Ralph, al tiempo que la miraba con las manos en los bolsillos.

—A mí no me parece un defecto —respondió ella—. No es absolutamente necesario sufrir, no estamos hechos para eso.

—Tú no, desde luego.

—No estoy hablando de mí.

Y se apartó unos pasos.

—No, claro que no es un defecto. Ser fuerte es una virtud.

—Solo que, si no sufres, te califican de dura —aseveró Isabel.

A través del pequeño salón por el que habían pasado al salir de la galería, llegaron al vestíbulo y se detuvieron al pie de la escalinata. Allí Ralph, tras coger una palmatoria de una hornacina, se la entregó a su prima para ir al dormitorio.

—No importa lo que digan de uno, porque cuando sufres te llaman idiota. Lo importante de verdad es ser lo más feliz posible.

Ella lo miró un instante; había tomado la vela y tenía un pie puesto en la escalinata de roble.

—Bueno —dijo—, a eso es a lo que he venido a Europa, a ser todo lo feliz que pueda. Buenas noches.

—¡Buenas noches! Te deseo mucho éxito en el empeño, y será un placer para mí contribuir a que lo logres.

Isabel se giró, y él la contempló mientras ascendía con lentitud. Después, las manos siempre en los bolsillos, regresó de nuevo al salón vacío.

6

Isabel Archer era una joven que tenía muchas teorías y una imaginación muy activa. Contaba con la fortuna de poseer una inteligencia muy superior a la de la mayoría de las personas entre las que el destino la había situado, una percepción mucho más acusada de la realidad circundante y un ansia por conocer todo aquello que se saliese de lo acostumbrado. Es cierto que entre sus contemporáneos se la consideraba una joven de enorme profundidad, ya que aquella notable gente nunca ocultaba su admiración ante un nivel intelectual del que ellos no tenían conciencia, y hablaban de Isabel como de un prodigio de sabiduría, alguien de quien se decía que había leído a los autores clásicos… traducidos. Una tía paterna suya, la señora Varian, quien profesaba auténtica veneración por los libros, en cierta ocasión propaló el rumor de que Isabel estaba escribiendo uno y afirmó que la joven llegaría a alcanzar notoriedad como escritora. La señora Varian tenía un alto concepto de la literatura, por la que sentía esa clase de aprecio derivado de una sensación de carencia. Su enorme casa, que destacaba por la profusión de mesas de mosaico y techos decorados, carecía de biblioteca, y en lo que a volúmenes impresos se refiere no contenía más que media docena de novelas en rústica en los aposentos de una de sus hijas. En la práctica, la relación de la señora Varian con la literatura se reducía al *The New York Interviewer*, ya que, como ella afirmaba, no sin razón, tras haber leído el *Interviewer,* uno perdía toda fe en la cultura. Obraba en consecuencia y procuraba mantener el *Interviewer* fuera del alcance de sus hijas, pues estaba decidida a educarlas adecuadamente, así que las jóvenes no leían nada en absoluto. La idea que ella tenía de las actividades de Isabel era un tanto ilusoria: la joven nunca había intentado escribir un libro y no sentía deseos de alcanzar los laureles como autora. Carecía de talento para la expresión y poseía escasa conciencia de ser un genio; lo único que tenía era una idea general de que la gente estaba en lo cierto al tratarla como alguien decididamente superior. Tanto si lo era como si no, la gente acertaba al admirarla si así lo creía; y es que, a menudo, Isabel tenía la sensación de que su mente funcionaba con mucha más rapidez que la de los otros, cosa que despertaba en ella una impaciencia que podía confundirse fácilmente con la superioridad. Podemos afirmar sin embages, que probablemente Isabel era propensa al pecado de la vanidad; solía examinar con complacencia el ámbito de su propia naturaleza; tenía la costumbre, con escaso fundamento, de dar por sentado que estaba en lo cierto; se rendía a sí misma todo tipo de homenajes. Al mismo tiempo, sus errores y vanas ilusiones eran de esa índole que todo biógrafo interesado en preservar la dignidad del sujeto biografiado debe guardarse de mencionar. Sus pensamientos eran una maraña de vagos conceptos que nunca habían sido enmendados por el buen juicio de personas bien informadas. En cuestiones de opinión siempre se había salido con la suya, y eso la había llevado a adentrarse por mil y un absurdos vericuetos. Había ocasiones en las que descubría que se había equivocado de forma grotesca, y entonces se sometía a una semana de humildad apasionada. Después reaparecía con la cabeza más erguida que nunca, ya que no tenía remedio: el ansia de pensar bien de sí misma era insaciable. Era de la teoría de que la vida no merecía la pena si no se vivía con esa premisa; de que había que estar entre los mejores, tener la certeza de contar con un pensamiento bien organizado (no podía evitar ser consciente de que su organización era excelente), desenvolverse en el ámbito de la iluminación, de la sabiduría innata, del impulso feliz, de la inspiración grácil y perenne. Le parecía casi tan superfluo dudar de sí misma como del mejor de los amigos: cada uno debería ser su mejor amigo y, así, proporcionarse la mejor de las compañías. La joven tenía cierta nobleza de imaginación que le prestaba no pocos buenos servicios y que le jugaba no pocas malas pasadas. La mitad del tiempo se lo pasaba pensando en la belleza, la valentía y la magnanimidad; estaba resuelta a ver el mundo como un lugar radiante, de libre expansión, de acción irresistible: sostenía que sentir miedo o vergüenza era algo detestable. Tenía una confianza sin límites en que jamás haría nada erróneo. Al descubrir sus errores, se había enojado de tal forma ante los que eran meramente sentimentales (tras el descubrimiento siempre se ponía a temblar como si acabase de zafarse de una trampa donde podría haber quedado atrapada hasta la asfixia) que la posibilidad de causar dolor en los sentimientos de otra persona, algo que se presentaba solo como una contingencia, la obligaba en ocasiones a contener el aliento. Siempre se le antojó que algo así era lo peor que podía sucederle. En general, si lo pensaba detenidamente, no albergaba duda alguna acerca de lo que era erróneo. No le agradaba pensar mucho en ello, pero cuando lo hacía reconocía de inmediato lo que estaba mal. Estaba mal ser mezquino, ser celoso, ser falso, ser cruel. No había visto

gran cosa de las maldades del mundo, pero sí que había conocido a mujeres que mentían y trataban de hacerse daño entre ellas. Ser testigo de semejantes cosas había acrecentado su superioridad moral: le parecía una indecencia no mostrar su repulsa hacia ellas. Por supuesto, el peligro que acecha a la superioridad moral es la falta de coherencia: el peligro de seguir enarbolando el estandarte cuando la plaza ya se ha rendido; un proceder tan avieso que resulta casi en deshonor para el propio estandarte. Pero Isabel, que sabía poco de la clase de artillería a la que se ven expuestas las jóvenes, se engañaba diciéndose que tales contradicciones jamás se advertirían en su propia conducta. Su vida iba a estar siempre en armonía con la impresión más grata que pudiese causar; sería lo que aparentaba, y aparentaría lo que era. A veces llegaba hasta el extremo de desear encontrarse algún día en una situación difícil, para así tener el placer de mostrarse todo lo heroica que la situación requiriese. En suma, su escaso conocimiento de la vida, sus exaltados ideales, su confianza a un tiempo inocente y dogmática, su carácter exigente e indulgente a la vez, su mezcla de curiosidad y perfeccionismo, de vivacidad e indiferencia, su anhelo de quedar muy bien y de ser si cabe aún mejor, su empeño en ver, en probar, en conocer, su combinación de espíritu delicado, lánguido y apasionado, y de criatura vehemente y subjetiva en sus premisas: todo eso la convertiría en víctima fácil de la crítica racional del lector si no estuviese destinada a despertar en él un impulso más tierno, más puro y expectante.

Una de las teorías de Isabel Archer era que podía considerarse muy afortunada al ser independiente, y que debería hacer un uso muy inteligente de dicho estado. Nunca lo consideraba como un estado de soledad, mucho menos de soltería; pensaba que tales descripciones eran endebles, y, además, su hermana Lily la animaba de continuo a ir a vivir con ella. Tenía Isabel una amiga a la que había conocido poco antes de la muerte de su padre, que era un ejemplo tan preclaro de actividad provechosa que siempre pensaba en ella como un modelo a seguir. Henrietta Stackpole gozaba de la ventaja de tener un don que era admirado; se había lanzado de lleno al mundo del periodismo, y sus crónicas para el *Interviewer*, de Washington, Newport, White Mountains y otros lugares, gozaban de reconocimiento universal. Isabel no tenía empacho en tacharlas de «efímeras», pero admiraba la valentía, la energía y el buen humor de la escritora, quien, sin padres y sin fortuna, había adoptado a tres de los hijos de una hermana enferma y viuda, cuyos estudios sufragaba gracias a las ganancias obtenidas de sus labores literarias. Henrietta se hallaba en la vía del progreso y tenía opiniones rotundas acerca de la mayoría de los asuntos; su deseo más ferviente había sido desde hacía tiempo viajar a Europa y enviar una serie de crónicas al *Interviewer* escritas bajo un prisma radical, empresa bastante fácil, ya que sabía de antemano cuáles iban a ser sus opiniones y cuántas objeciones podían hacerse a la mayoría de las instituciones europeas. Al enterarse de que Isabel partía hacia Europa, quiso emprender su proyecto de inmediato, pensando, como es natural, que sería una delicia que ambas hiciesen juntas el viaje. Sin embargo, se había visto obligada a postergar su empresa. Consideraba a Isabel una criatura extraordinaria, y había hablado encubiertamente de ella en algunas de sus crónicas, aunque nunca había revelado el hecho a su amiga, a quien no le habría agradado y que no era lectora asidua del *Interviewer*. Henrietta, para Isabel, era más que nada la prueba fehaciente de que una mujer podía bastarse por sí misma y ser feliz. Sus recursos eran obvios, pero incluso si una no disfrutaba de talento periodístico ni de habilidad para adivinar, como afirmaba Henrietta, lo que el público quería, no por ello tenía que conformarse, creer que carecía de vocación, de aptitudes provechosas, y resignarse a ser frívola y vacua. Isabel estaba firmemente decidida a no ser vacua. Bastaba con esperar con la paciencia necesaria para hallar la labor adecuada a cada uno. Ni que decir tiene que, entre todas aquellas teorías, la joven contaba con una colección de ideas sobre el tema del matrimonio. La primera de la lista era el convencimiento de la vulgaridad que entrañaba otorgarle demasiada importancia. Rogaba con fervor que se la preservase de caer en el entusiasmo a tal respecto; sostenía que una mujer debía ser capaz de vivir para sí misma, de no existir una debilidad fuera de lo común, y que era perfectamente posible ser feliz sin la compañía de una persona del sexo opuesto, de mentalidad más o menos tosca. Las plegarias de la joven obtuvieron suficiente respuesta; algo puro y orgulloso que había en ella, algo que un pretendiente desdeñado, con tendencia al análisis, hubiese calificado de duro y árido, la había preservado hasta el momento de hacer cualquier vana conjetura en lo referente al tema de posibles maridos. Pocos de los hombres que veía parecían merecedores de que invirtiera su tiempo en ellos, y la hacía sonreír el pensamiento de que alguno de ellos se ofreciese como un incentivo para la esperanza y una recompensa a la paciencia. En el fondo de su alma (era lo más hondo que en ella había), albergaba la creencia de que, si una determinada luz la iluminaba, sería capaz de entregarse por completo; pero dicha imagen, en general, era demasiado formidable para resultar atractiva. Los pensamientos de Isabel revoloteaban en torno a la idea, pero rara vez se detenían en ella mucho tiempo, y tras unos instantes terminaba causándole alarma. A menudo le parecía que pensaba demasiado en sí misma, y en cualquier momento del año habría enrojecido si alguien le hubiese dicho que era una auténtica egoísta. Siempre

estaba planeando su desarrollo, deseando alcanzar la perfección, observando sus progresos. En su naturaleza, en aquella vanidad suya, había cierta esencia a jardín, vestigios de perfume y murmullos de arbustos, enramadas umbrías y panoramas despejados, que la llevaban a pensar que la introspección era, después de todo, un ejercicio al aire libre, y que una visita a los recovecos del propio espíritu resultaba inofensiva si uno regresaba de ella cargado de rosas. Pero a menudo se veía obligada a recordar que existían otros jardines en el mundo aparte de los de su extraordinario espíritu, e incluso que existían numerosos lugares que de jardines no tenían nada, que no eran sino territorios lúgubres y pestilentes, en los que crecía una tupida vegetación de sufrimiento y fealdad. En medio de aquella corriente de curiosidad satisfecha en la que últimamente había estado flotando, que la había transportado a la hermosa y vieja Inglaterra y que todavía podía arrastrarla mucho más lejos, a menudo se detenía al pensar en los miles de personas que eran menos felices que ella, pensamiento que durante un momento hacía que su conciencia elevada y plena semejase una suerte de inmodestia. ¿Qué lugar hay que otorgar al sufrimiento del mundo dentro de los planes personales para alcanzar el placer? Hay que confesar que tal preocupación nunca le duraba mucho tiempo. Era demasiado joven, demasiado impaciente por vivir, demasiado ajena al dolor. Siempre retornaba a su teoría de que una mujer joven a la que a fin de cuentas todos consideraban inteligente debía primero formarse una impresión general de la vida. Dicha impresión era necesaria para evitar errores, y una vez obtenida podría convertir el infortunio de los otros en objeto de especial atención.

Inglaterra era una revelación para ella, y se sentía entretenida como una niña ante una pantomima. En aquellos viajes de la niñez a Europa solo había visto el continente, y lo había visto a través de la ventana de su cuartito infantil; la Meca de su padre había sido París, no Londres, y las niñas, como es natural, se habían visto excluidas de gran parte de lo que a él le interesaba en esa ciudad. Y además, las imágenes que guardaba de aquella época se habían vuelto difusas y remotas, y el aire de viejo mundo que impregnaba cuanto ahora veía tenía todo el encanto de lo desconocido. La casa de su tío le parecía un cuadro hecho realidad; a Isabel no se le escapaba detalle de lo refinado y placentero; la extrema perfección de Gardencourt revelaba todo un mundo y satisfacía a la vez una necesidad. Las amplias estancias de techos bajos y oscuros y rincones en penumbra, los hondos alféizares y los curiosos marcos, la luz sosegada sobre los bruñidos zócalos oscuros, el intenso verde del jardín que parecía filtrarse siempre en el interior, aquella sensación de intimidad ordenada en el núcleo de una «propiedad» (un lugar en el que los sonidos tenían la virtud de ser ocasionales, donde la tierra misma amortiguaba los pasos y el aire denso y apacible impedía toda fricción en el contacto y toda estridencia en la conversación), todo ello era muy acorde con el gusto de nuestra joven dama, y en su caso el gusto ejercía un papel determinante en las emociones. Forjó una rápida amistad con su tío, y a menudo se sentaba en su compañía cuando hacía que sacasen al césped su sillón. Él pasaba horas al aire libre, sentado con las manos cruzadas como una divinidad plácida y doméstica, como un lar servicial que hubiese realizado su tarea, recibido su estipendio, y tratase ahora de acostumbrarse a semanas y meses de total asueto. Isabel lo entretenía más de lo que ella sospechaba (el efecto que producía en la gente era a menudo distinto del que ella suponía), y con frecuencia se regalaba el placer de incitarla a la charla. Con este término definía él la conversación de su sobrina, en la que había mucho de ese tono que se aprecia en las jóvenes de su país, a las que el mundo escucha con mucha más atención que a sus hermanas de otras tierras. Al igual que a la mayoría de las jóvenes estadounidenses, a Isabel la habían alentado a expresarse; habían escuchado con atención sus observaciones; se le habían supuesto emociones y opiniones. Muchas de esas opiniones suyas eran sin duda de escaso valor, muchas de sus emociones se diluían nada más expresarlas; pero habían dejado huella al concederle al menos el hábito de aparentar que sentía y pensaba, y, además, al conferir a sus palabras, cuando de verdad algo la conmovía, aquella presteza y vivacidad que tanta gente interpretaba como señal de superioridad. El señor Touchett solía pensar que Isabel le recordaba a su mujer cuando esta se encontraba en plena adolescencia. Él se había enamorado de la señora Touchett por ser fresca y natural, de pronta comprensión y respuesta, cualidades todas compartidas por su sobrina. Nunca, sin embargo, le mencionó la analogía a la joven, ya que si bien la señora Touchett había sido alguna vez como Isabel, Isabel no era en absoluto como la señora Touchett. El anciano era todo bondad con la joven; como él decía, hacía ya mucho tiempo que no había habido vida joven en aquella casa; y nuestra heroína de voz clara y movimiento rápido y ruidoso resultaba tan agradable a sus sentidos como el rumor del agua que fluye. Quería hacer algo por ella y deseaba que ella se lo pidiese. Pero la joven no hacía más que preguntas, si bien es cierto que las hacía en abundancia. Su tío contaba con una gran provisión de respuestas, aunque a veces la insistencia de ella adoptaba formas que le causaban desconcierto. La joven le preguntaba con prolijidad sobre Inglaterra, la Constitución británica, el carácter inglés, la situación política, los usos y costumbres de la familia real, las peculiaridades de la

aristocracia, la manera de vivir y pensar de sus vecinos; y cuando rogaba que la instruyese sobre dichas cuestiones, normalmente quería saber si se correspondían con las descripciones de los libros. El anciano siempre se la quedaba mirando con aquella sonrisa suya agradable y mordaz, al tiempo que alisaba las arrugas del chal que le cubría las piernas.

—¿Los libros? —dijo en una ocasión—. No sé mucho de libros. Eso tendrás que preguntárselo a Ralph. Siempre he llegado a mis propias conclusiones, he obtenido mi información de forma natural. Ni siquiera he hecho nunca muchas preguntas; me limitaba a callar y observar. Desde luego, he gozado de excelentes oportunidades, mejores de las que una joven pueda tener por naturaleza. Soy de talante inquisitivo, aunque a simple vista nunca lo dirías: por más que tú me observaras, yo te observaría todavía más a ti. Llevo observando a esta gente más de treinta y cinco años, y no tengo empacho en decir que he almacenado una información considerable. En conjunto es un país magnífico, mejor tal vez de lo que solemos considerarlo allende los mares. Hay una serie de mejoras que me gustaría que se introdujesen; pero de momento no parece que, en general, sean conscientes de su necesidad. Cuando la mayoría siente la necesidad de algo, normalmente se las componen para conseguirlo, pero aquí parecen encontrarse bastante cómodos a la espera de que llegue ese momento. Sin duda, me siento más a gusto entre ellos de lo que esperaba al principio de llegar aquí. Imagino que es porque he alcanzado un grado de éxito considerable. Cuando se tiene éxito, como es natural, uno se siente mucho más como en casa.

—¿Cree que si yo tengo éxito voy a sentirme tan a gusto como en casa? —preguntó Isabel.

—Creo que es muy probable, y está claro que vas a tener éxito. En este país las jóvenes estadounidenses gustan mucho, las tratan con mucha amabilidad. Pero no debes sentirte demasiado como en casa, ya sabes.

—Claro que no, no estoy nada segura de que eso me satisficiese —dijo Isabel con énfasis y buen juicio—. El lugar me gusta de veras, pero no estoy tan segura de que me guste la gente.

—Son una gente muy buena; especialmente si te gustan.

—Yo no dudo de que sean buena gente —replicó Isabel—, pero ¿se muestran agradables en sociedad? Ya sé que no van a robarme ni a pegarme, pero ¿se mostrarán agradables conmigo? Eso es lo que me gusta que la gente haga. No tengo reparo en decirlo, ya que es algo que siempre he apreciado. No creo que sean muy agradables con las jóvenes; en las novelas no lo son.

—No sé cómo será en las novelas —dijo el señor Touchett—. Creo que están escritas con mucha habilidad, pero imagino que no son muy exactas. Una vez tuvimos aquí con nosotros a una dama que escribía novelas, era amiga de Ralph y la invitó a venir. Era muy positiva, una mujer muy dispuesta a todo, pero no era la clase de persona de la que uno pueda fiarse en lo tocante a reflejar la realidad. Demasiado imaginativa, supongo que ahí radicaba el problema. Más adelante publicó una obra de ficción en la que se suponía que hacía una descripción (más bien una caricatura, se podría decir) de este humilde servidor. Yo no la leí, pero Ralph me entregó el libro con los pasajes principales subrayados. Se suponía que hacía una descripción de mi forma de conversar; de las peculiaridades estadounidenses, de la pronunciación nasalizada, de las ideas yanquis, de las barras y estrellas. Pues bien, de exacta no tenía nada; es imposible que me hubiese escuchado con atención. No me importó que reprodujese mi conversación si quería, pero no me gustó la idea de que no se hubiese tomado la molestia de escucharla. Es evidente que hablo como un estadounidense, no voy a hablar como un hotentote. Pero, hable como hable, he logrado que aquí me entiendan muy bien. Lo que no hago es hablar como el anciano caballero en la novela de esa dama. Ese no era estadounidense, allá no lo querríamos a ningún precio. Tan solo menciono el hecho para demostrarte que las novelas no siempre son exactas. Por supuesto, yo no tengo hijas, y como la señora Touchett reside en Florencia, no he tenido mucha ocasión de observar a las jóvenes. A veces parece que las jóvenes de las clases inferiores no sean muy bien tratadas, pero supongo que las de clase alta disfrutan de mejor situación, e incluso, hasta cierto punto, las de clase media.

—¡Por Dios bendito! —exclamó Isabel—. ¿Cuántas clases tienen aquí? Unas cincuenta, imagino.

—Bueno, yo jamás las he contado. Nunca he prestado mucha atención a las clases. Esa es la ventaja de ser un estadounidense en este país: no se pertenece a ninguna clase.

—Eso espero —dijo Isabel—. ¡Imagínese lo que sería pertenecer a una clase inglesa!

—Bueno, algunas de ellas son muy cómodas… especialmente las más elevadas. Pero para mí solo existen dos clases: la gente de la que me fío, y la gente de la que no. Y de esas dos, querida Isabel, tú perteneces a la primera.

—Le estoy muy agradecida —respondió presta la muchacha.

La forma que tenía de recibir los halagos a veces parecía un tanto seca, se deshacía de ellos lo más rápido posible. Pero a este respecto, a veces se la juzgaba mal, se la creía insensible a ellos cuando, de hecho, se trataba simplemente

de que sentía renuencia a mostrar hasta qué punto la complacían. Mostrarlo era mostrar demasiado.

—Estoy convencida de que los ingleses son muy convencionales —añadió.

—Lo tienen todo muy bien atado —reconoció el señor Touchett—. Todo está previsto de antemano, no dejan nada para el último momento.

—A mí no me gusta que esté todo previsto de antemano —dijo la joven—. Me gusta que haya imprevistos.

A su tío pareció divertirle la claridad de sus preferencias.

—Bueno, lo que está claro de antemano es que tú tendrás mucho éxito —replicó—. E imagino que eso te agradará.

—Si son convencionales de esa manera tan estúpida, no tendré éxito. Yo no me rijo en absoluto por convencionalismos estúpidos. Más bien todo lo contrario. Y eso no les va a agradar.

—No, te equivocas de medio a medio —dijo el anciano—. Es imposible adivinar lo que les va a gustar. Son muy contradictorios; en eso reside su principal interés.

—Ah, bueno —dijo Isabel, de pie ante su tío, con las manos asidas al cinturón de su vestido negro y recorriendo el jardín con la mirada—. ¡Eso será perfecto para mí!

7

Los dos se entretenían hablando una y otra vez acerca de la manera de ser del pueblo británico, como si la joven estuviese en condiciones de poder agradar a su gente, pero lo cierto era que, hasta el momento, el pueblo británico permanecía profundamente indiferente con respecto a la señorita Isabel Archer, quien, tal como aseguraba su primo, había tenido la mala fortuna de ir a parar a la casa más aburrida de Inglaterra. Su tío, aquejado de gota, recibía a muy poca gente, y tampoco era de esperar que la señora Touchett, que no había cultivado la amistad de los vecinos de su marido, fuese a recibir la visita de aquellos. No obstante, ella tenía una afición muy peculiar: le encantaba recibir tarjetas de visita. Sentía poca inclinación hacia lo que suele denominarse relaciones sociales, pero nada le agradaba más que encontrarse con la mesita del vestíbulo cubierta por los rectángulos blancos de aquellas simbólicas cartulinas. Se vanagloriaba de ser una mujer sumamente justa, y había llegado a la indiscutible verdad de que en este mundo nada se obtiene sin dar algo a cambio. No había desempeñado en sociedad el papel de señora de Gardencourt, y por tanto no era de esperar que la gente de los alrededores llevase cuenta detallada de sus idas y venidas. Pero eso no era obstáculo para que encontrase injusto que se hiciese tan poco caso de sus movimientos y que pensase que su fracaso (en realidad muy gratuito) en convertirse en alguien importante del entorno tenía muy poco que ver con sus alusiones sarcásticas al país de adopción de su marido. Isabel se encontró así en la insólita situación de tener que defender la Constitución británica frente a su tía, ya que la señora Touchett había adquirido el hábito de lanzar dardos envenenados contra tan venerable institución. Isabel sentía siempre el impulso de arrancar de ella los dardos, no porque pensase que infligían daño alguno a aquel viejo y seco pergamino, sino porque era del parecer de que su tía podía hacer mejor uso de aquella mordacidad suya. Ella también era muy crítica, algo inherente a su edad, sexo y nacionalidad; pero a la vez era muy sentimental, y había algo en aquella ironía de la señora Touchett que hacía brotar el manantial de sus principios morales.

—Y entonces, ¿cuál es su punto de vista? —le preguntó a su tía—. Si critica todo lo de aquí, es porque debe de tener un punto de vista. Y el suyo no parece ser el de una estadounidense, ya que tampoco parecía estar muy de acuerdo con todo lo de allá. Cuando yo critico algo, es porque tengo el mío propio, y es un punto de vista completamente estadounidense.

—Mi querida jovencita —dijo la señora Touchett—, existen en el mundo tantos puntos de vista como gente inteligente para formularlos. Bien podrías decir que, en ese caso, no habrá muchos. ¿Que si el mío es estadounidense? Jamás en la vida: eso sería demostrar una espantosa estrechez de miras. Mi punto de vista, gracias a Dios, es personal.

Isabel pensó que la respuesta era mejor de lo que le gustaría reconocer: era una descripción bastante acertada de su propia manera de juzgar las cosas, pero no habría estado muy bien decirlo en voz alta. En labios de una persona de menos edad y menos curtida por la experiencia que la señora Touchett, una declaración así habría sonado a falta de modestia, incluso a arrogancia. Sin embargo, se arriesgó a hacerla mientras hablaba con Ralph, con quien charlaba a menudo y con el que la conversación era de una naturaleza que dejaba amplio margen para toda suerte de extravagancias. Su primo había adquirido la costumbre, como suele decirse, de tomarle el pelo. Desde muy pronto había adquirido a sus ojos la reputación de tomárselo todo a broma, y no era hombre que desaprovechase los privilegios que una reputación así confiere. Ella le acusaba de una falta de seriedad odiosa, de reírse de todo, empezando por sí mismo. De su inclinación a la irreverencia, el único que quedaba a salvo era su padre; con el resto ejercía la ironía de forma indiscriminada, tanto con el hijo de su padre, con los débiles pulmones de dicho caballero o con su inútil vida, como con su fantástica madre, con sus amigos (en especial lord Warburton), con sus dos países, el de origen y el de adopción, o con su encantadora prima recién hallada.

—Tengo una orquesta de música en mi antecámara —le dijo a Isabel en una ocasión—. Tiene órdenes de tocar sin interrupción, lo cual me proporciona dos excelentes servicios: evitar que llegue a mis aposentos privados el ruido del exterior, y hacer creer al mundo que allí se celebra siempre un baile.

Y sin duda era música de baile la que se oía normalmente cuando uno se aproximaba a la orquesta de Ralph: los valses más alegres parecían flotar en el ambiente. Isabel a menudo se sentía irritada a causa de aquella constante

musiquilla, le habría gustado atravesar la antecámara, como su primo la llamaba, e introducirse en sus aposentos privados. Importaba muy poco que él le asegurase que se trataba de un lugar muy deprimente: le habría encantado encargarse de limpiarlo y ponerlo en orden. Dejarla fuera no era sino una hospitalidad a medias. Como castigo, Isabel le propinaba innumerables golpes con la palmeta de aquel ingenio suyo, rotundo y joven. Cabe señalar que en gran medida lo ejercía en defensa propia, ya que su primo se divertía llamándola «Columbia» y acusándola de un patriotismo tan ardiente que abrasaba. Dibujó una caricatura de ella en la que aparecía representada como una joven muy bonita, cuyo vestido, que seguía los dictados de la moda del momento, estaba confeccionado con la enseña nacional. El mayor temor que Isabel tenía en la vida en esta etapa de su desarrollo era el de parecer estrecha de miras; lo que más temía después era serlo realmente. Pese a ello, no tuvo escrúpulo alguno en alimentar la creencia de su primo y fingir que suspiraba por los encantos de su tierra natal. Se mostraría tan típicamente estadounidense como a él le gustara considerarla, y si lo que le apetecía era reírse de ella, lo iba a mantener bien ocupado. Salía en defensa de Inglaterra ante su madre, pero cuando Ralph cantaba las alabanzas del país con intención, como decía ella, de provocarla, se encontró capaz de discrepar de él en muchos aspectos. De hecho, el carácter de aquel pequeño y maduro país le resultaba tan dulce como el sabor de las peras en octubre; y su propia satisfacción radicaba en la buena disposición que le permitía aceptar las chanzas de su primo y pagarle con la misma moneda. Y si su buen humor flaqueaba, no era porque pensase que él la estuviese tratando mal, sino porque de repente sentía lástima de Ralph. Le parecía que hablaba a ciegas y que no se creía lo que estaba diciendo.

—No sé qué te ocurre —le dijo en una ocasión—, pero sospecho que eres un gran farsante.

—Eso eres tú quien tiene que decidirlo —respondió Ralph, que no estaba acostumbrado a que le hablasen con tanta crudeza.

—No sé qué es lo que de verdad te importa; creo que no te importa nada. No te importa realmente Inglaterra cuando la alabas; no te importa Estados Unidos por mucho que pretendas denigrarlo.

—Lo único que me importa eres tú, querida prima —dijo Ralph.

—Si al menos pudiera creerme eso, me alegraría mucho.

—¡Ah, bueno, me gustaría que así fuera! —exclamó Ralph.

Si Isabel lo hubiese creído, no habría estado muy lejos de la verdad. Ralph pensaba mucho en ella, la tenía constantemente presente. En un momento en que sus pensamientos representaban una gran carga para él, la repentina llegada de su prima, que no prometía nada y era un generoso regalo del destino, había servido para renovarlos y estimularlos, les había dado alas y un pretexto para alzar el vuelo. El pobre Ralph había estado muchas semanas sumido en la melancolía. Sus perspectivas, ya de por sí sombrías, estaban cubiertas por una nube todavía más densa y oscura. Se encontraba muy inquieto a causa de su padre, cuya gota, que hasta entonces había afectado solo a las piernas, había comenzado a extenderse por zonas más vitales. El anciano había estado gravemente enfermo durante la primavera, y los médicos le habían dicho a Ralph entre susurros que un nuevo ataque sería más difícil de tratar. En ese momento parecía no sufrir dolores, pero Ralph no conseguía librarse de la sospecha de que aquello era un subterfugio del enemigo, que seguía al acecho para pillarlo desprevenido. Si su maniobra triunfaba, había pocas esperanzas de que encontrase gran resistencia. Ralph siempre había dado por hecho que su padre le sobreviviría, que su nombre sería el primero en recibir la triste llamada. Padre e hijo habían sido compañeros inseparables, y la idea de quedarse solo con los restos de una vida sin aliciente entre las manos no resultaba nada gratificante para el joven, que siempre había confiado tácitamente en la ayuda de su progenitor para superar las adversidades. Ante la perspectiva de perder su gran motivación, Ralph se vio privado de su única fuente de inspiración. Si los dos muriesen al mismo tiempo, no habría problema, pero sin el ánimo que la compañía de su padre le proporcionaba, difícilmente tendría paciencia para esperar su turno. No contaba con el aliciente de pensar que era indispensable para su madre; con su madre la norma era no lamentarse. Pensó que desde luego le hacía flaco favor a su padre al desear que, de los dos, fuese el más activo y no el pasivo el que sufriese la herida lacerante; recordaba que el anciano siempre había considerado su pronóstico de un fin prematuro como un ingenioso sofisma, que él estaría encantado de desacreditar, en la medida que le fuera posible, muriéndose primero. Pero entre aquellas dos victorias, la de refutar a un hijo sofista y la de conservar durante algo más de tiempo un estado vital del que, pese a todos sus sinsabores, disfrutaba, a Ralph no le parecía pecado desear que fuese esta última la que lograse el señor Touchett.

Aquellas eran cuestiones delicadas, pero la llegada de Isabel puso fin a tales cavilaciones. Incluso insinuó que podría existir algo que compensase el insoportable hastío de sobrevivir a su jovial padre. Se preguntó si era «amor» lo que albergaba hacia aquella espontánea joven de Albany, pero decidió que, después de todo, no era así. A la semana

de haberla conocido, ya estaba casi convencido de ello, y con cada día que pasaba se sentía un poco más seguro. Lord Warburton había estado en lo cierto con respecto a ella: era una jovencita realmente interesante. Ralph se preguntó cómo había logrado su vecino descubrirlo tan pronto; y a continuación se dijo que no era más que una nueva prueba de las grandes dotes de su amigo, algo que siempre había admirado muchísimo. Aunque su prima no llegase a ser otra cosa que un entretenimiento para él, Ralph era consciente de que se trataba de un entretenimiento de primera categoría. «Ver en acción a un personaje así —se dijo para sus adentros—, esa pequeña fuerza auténtica y apasionada es lo mejor de la naturaleza. Es mejor que la obra de arte más refinada, mejor que un bajorrelieve griego, que un gran cuadro de Tiziano, que una catedral gótica. Resulta muy agradable sentirse tan bien tratado cuando uno menos se lo esperaba. Nunca había estado más deprimido, más hastiado que la semana anterior a su llegada; jamás había tenido menos esperanzas de que sucediese algo agradable. Y de repente, por correo, me llega un Tiziano para colgar de mi pared, un bajorrelieve griego con el que adornar mi chimenea. Depositan en mis manos la llave de un precioso edificio, y me dicen que entre en él y lo admire. «Pobre diablo, has sido terriblemente desagradecido, y a partir de ahora más vale que calles y no vuelvas a refunfuñar nunca más.» El sentimiento que inspiraba estas reflexiones era muy genuino, pero no era exactamente cierto que hubiesen depositado una llave en las manos de Ralph. Su prima era una muchacha muy brillante, y sería necesario, como decía él, mucho esfuerzo para llegar a conocerla, pero era necesario hacerlo, y su actitud con respecto a ella, pese a ser contemplativa y crítica, no era enjuiciadora. Ralph examinaba el edificio desde fuera y lo admiraba intensamente; miraba a través de las ventanas y la impresión que recibía era igualmente positiva. Pero tenía la sensación de que solo alcanzaba a ver retazos y de que todavía no había estado bajo su techo. La puerta tenía el cerrojo echado y, aunque tuviese las llaves en el bolsillo, tenía la impresión de que ninguna encajaría en la cerradura. Isabel era inteligente y generosa; era de naturaleza libre y refinada, pero ¿qué se proponía hacer consigo misma? Esta pregunta era poco ortodoxa, ya que con la mayoría de las mujeres uno no tenía ocasión de plantearla. La mayoría de las mujeres no hacían nada consigo mismas; esperaban, en actitudes pasivas más o menos dignas, que apareciese ante ellas un hombre y les proporcionase un destino. La originalidad de Isabel consistía en darle a uno la impresión de albergar intenciones propias. «Cuando las ponga en práctica, ¡espero estar ahí para verlo!», se dijo Ralph.

A él, naturalmente, le correspondió hacer los honores de la casa. El señor Touchett se hallaba confinado a su sillón, y la situación de su mujer era la de un huésped un tanto adusto, así que en la línea de conducta que se abrió ante Ralph había una mezcla armoniosa de deber y placer. Aunque no era muy dado a caminar, paseó por los jardines con su prima, distracción para la que el tiempo se mostró favorable con una persistencia que Isabel no había incluido en las previsiones un tanto lúgubres que del clima del lugar se había hecho. Y en las largas tardes, cuya duración daba la medida exacta de sus anhelos satisfechos, iban en barca por el río, el encantador riachuelo, como Isabel lo llamaba, cuya orilla opuesta parecía todavía ser parte del umbral del paisaje; o bien recorrían la campiña en un faetón, no muy alto, espacioso y de gruesas ruedas, que en el pasado el señor Touchett había utilizado con frecuencia, pero de cuyo uso ya no disfrutaba. Isabel sí que disfrutaba muchísimo de él y, empuñando las riendas de manera que el cochero calificaba de «diestra», no se cansaba jamás de guiar a los magníficos caballos de su tío por sendas y vericuetos serpenteantes repletos de aquellos detalles rústicos que ella había esperado encontrar; pasaban por delante de casitas de madera con tejado de paja, de tabernas de pulidas celosías, de extensiones de antiguos prados comunales y de jardines solitarios apenas entrevistos, rodeados de setos frondosos a esas alturas del verano. Cuando regresaban a casa, solían encontrarse el té ya servido en el jardín y descubrían que la señora Touchett no había eludido la obligación de servirle una taza a su marido. No obstante, ambos permanecían la mayor parte del tiempo en silencio: el anciano con la cabeza recostada y los ojos cerrados, y su esposa ocupada en hacer punto y exhibiendo ese aire de extraordinaria concentración con el que algunas damas contemplan el movimiento de las agujas.

Uno de los días, sin embargo, había llegado una visita. Los dos jóvenes, tras pasar una hora en el río, regresaban sin prisas a la casa cuando divisaron a lord Warburton sentado bajo los árboles y enfrascado en una conversación con la señora Touchett, que, aun de lejos, podía adivinarse tediosa. Había venido de su casa en coche trayendo consigo una maleta y había pedido, tal como el padre y el hijo a menudo le invitaban a hacer, comida y alojamiento. Isabel, tras verlo tan solo durante media hora el día de su llegada, había descubierto en tan breve espacio que el joven le gustaba; de hecho, la imagen del joven había quedado grabada con fuerza en su sensible espíritu y había pensado en él en varias ocasiones. Había albergado la esperanza de verlo de nuevo, como también esperaba hacerlo con otros cuantos. Gardencourt no era un sitio aburrido: el lugar en sí era espléndido, su tío se le antojaba cada vez más una especie de abuelo soñado, y Ralph era completamente distinto a todos los primos que había tratado y, hasta entonces,

la opinión que los primos le merecían había sido más bien negativa. Sin embargo, sus impresiones eran aún tan recientes y se renovaban con tanta celeridad que todavía no había más que un atisbo de un cambio radical de dicha opinión. Pero Isabel había tenido que recordarse a sí misma que estaba interesada en la naturaleza humana, y que su mayor deseo al iniciar aquel viaje había sido el de conocer a cuanta más gente mejor. Cuando Ralph le decía, como había hecho ya en varias ocasiones: «Me sorprende que puedas soportar esto; deberías conocer a algunos de nuestros vecinos y de nuestros amigos, porque, aunque te parezca extraño, contamos con unos cuantos», o cuando se ofrecía a invitar a lo que él llamaba «un montón de gente» y a introducirla en la sociedad inglesa, ella alentaba aquel impulso hospitalario y le aseguraba de antemano estar deseando entrar en liza. Sin embargo, hasta el momento, dichas promesas habían dado pocos frutos, y cabe decir al lector en confidencia que si el joven se demoraba en cumplirlas era porque la obligación de entretener a su prima no le resultaba tan penosa como para requerir en modo alguno la ayuda de los demás. Isabel le había hablado muy a menudo de «especímenes», término este que tenía mucha importancia en su vocabulario; le había dado a entender que deseaba conocer la sociedad inglesa ilustrada por sus personajes más representativos.

—Pues mira, ahí tienes a todo un espécimen —le dijo Ralph cuando subían del río y reconoció a lord Warburton.

—¿Un espécimen de qué? —preguntó la joven.

—Del caballero inglés.

—¿Quieres decir que son todos como él?

—Claro que no. No todos son como él.

—En ese caso, es un espécimen muy bueno —dijo Isabel—, porque estoy segura de que es agradable.

—Sí, es muy agradable. Y, además, muy afortunado.

El afortunado lord Warburton estrechó la mano de nuestra heroína y le expresó su deseo de que se encontrase bien.

—Aunque no es necesario que lo pregunte —dijo—, puesto que ha estado manejando los remos.

—He estado remando un poco —respondió Isabel—, pero ¿cómo lo sabe?

—Oh, porque sé que él no rema, es demasiado perezoso —dijo su señoría señalando a Ralph entre risas.

—Tiene una buena excusa para su pereza —replicó Isabel bajando un poco la voz.

—Ya, ¡él siempre tiene buena excusa para todo! —exclamó lord Warburton entre sonoras carcajadas.

—Mi excusa para no remar es lo bien que lo hace mi prima —dijo Ralph—. Lo hace todo bien. ¡No toca nada sin que después parezca haber sido adornado!

—Le hace a uno sentir ganas de que usted le toque, señorita Archer —declaró lord Warburton.

—Cuando a uno le tocan de la manera adecuada, nunca es para peor —dijo Isabel, que, si bien se sentía complacida al oír que tenía numerosas cualidades, era por fortuna capaz de discernir que dicha complacencia no era indicación de una mente débil, dado que había varias cosas en las que ella sobresalía. Su deseo de pensar bien de sí misma contaba, al menos, con el elemento de humildad necesario para exigir siempre pruebas que lo demostrasen.

Lord Warburton no solo pasó la noche en Gardencourt, sino que lo convencieron de que permaneciese allí un segundo día, y al llegar este a su fin, decidió posponer de nuevo la partida hasta el siguiente. Durante este tiempo muchos de sus comentarios estuvieron dirigidos a Isabel, que recibió de muy buen grado aquellas demostraciones de estima. Descubrió que él le gustaba muchísimo; la primera impresión que había causado en ella había sido poderosa, pero al término de una velada pasada en su compañía, le faltaba ya muy poco para considerarlo, aunque sin la parte escabrosa, un héroe de novela. La joven se retiró a descansar con la impresión de ser muy afortunada, con la sensación renovada de posibles venturas. «Es muy agradable conocer a dos personas tan encantadoras como estas», se dijo, y al decir «estas» se refería a su primo y al amigo de este. Pero, además, cabe añadir que había tenido lugar un incidente que podría, en apariencia, haber puesto a prueba su buen humor. El señor Touchett se había ido a la cama a las nueve y media, pero su mujer permaneció en el salón en compañía de los demás miembros del grupo. Prolongó su vigilia durante algo menos de una hora, y después, poniéndose en pie, le indicó a Isabel que había llegado el momento de despedirse de los caballeros. Isabel no sentía todavía deseos de irse a dormir; la ocasión, para ella, tenía un carácter festivo, y las fiestas no acostumbraban a terminar tan pronto. Así que, sin pensárselo más, contestó de forma muy simple:

—¿Es necesario que me retire ya, querida tía? Subiré dentro de media hora.

—Me es imposible esperarte —respondió la señora Touchett.

—No, si no tiene por qué esperarme. Ralph se encargará de encenderme la vela —aseguró Isabel alegremente.

—Yo le encenderé la vela, permítame que sea yo quien lo haga, señorita Archer —intervino lord Warburton—. Lo

único que le pido es que no sea antes de la medianoche.

La señora Touchett posó sus brillantes ojillos un momento en él, y a continuación miró con frialdad a su sobrina.

—No puedes quedarte a solas con dos caballeros. No estás… no estás en tu bendita Albany, querida.

Isabel se puso en pie, ruborizada.

—Ojalá lo estuviese —dijo.

—¡Por Dios, mamá! —exclamó Ralph.

—¡Mi querida señora Touchett! —murmuró lord Warburton.

—Yo no he hecho su país, señor mío —declaró la señora Touchett con aire majestuoso—. Tengo que aceptarlo como es.

—¿Es que no puedo quedarme con mi propio primo? —inquirió Isabel.

—No sabía yo que lord Warburton fuese primo tuyo.

—Quizá deba ser yo el que se vaya a la cama —sugirió el invitado—. Así se solucionaría el problema.

La señora Touchett esbozó un leve gesto de desesperación y tomó de nuevo asiento.

—Muy bien, si no hay otro remedio, me quedaré levantada hasta la medianoche.

Ralph, mientras tanto, le había entregado la vela a Isabel. La había estado observando, y tenía la impresión de que estaba a punto de perder la paciencia, incidente que podía resultar muy interesante. Pero si lo que esperaba era un estallido de furia, se vio decepcionado, ya que la joven se limitó a soltar una risita, les dio las buenas noches con un gesto y se retiró en compañía de su tía. Por su parte, Ralph se sintió enojado con su madre, aunque pensaba que tenía razón. Al llegar arriba, las dos damas se separaron ante la puerta de la señora Touchett. Isabel no había dicho nada mientras subían.

—No hay duda de que te molesta que me haya inmiscuido en tus asuntos.

Isabel reflexionó un instante y dijo:

—No estoy molesta, pero sí sorprendida… y bastante desconcertada. ¿Estaría mal que me hubiese quedado en el salón?

—Por supuesto que sí. Aquí las jóvenes, en las casas decentes, no se quedan a solas en compañía de caballeros hasta altas horas de la noche.

—En ese caso, ha hecho muy bien en decírmelo —dijo Isabel—. No lo comprendo, pero me alegra saberlo.

—Siempre te lo diré —respondió su tía— cuando vea que te tomas lo que para mí son excesivas libertades.

—Le ruego que lo haga, pero no puedo asegurarle que vaya a considerar siempre justas sus reprimendas.

—Es muy probable que no sea así. Te gusta demasiado salirte con la tuya.

—Sí, creo que así es. Pero quiero saber siempre lo que no se debe hacer.

—¿Para hacerlo? —preguntó su tía.

—Para elegir —respondió Isabel.

8

Como Isabel sentía devoción por todo lo romántico, lord Warburton se aventuró a expresar el deseo de que fuese algún día a visitar su casa, un lugar muy curioso y antiguo. Consiguió arrancar a la señora Touchett la promesa de que llevaría a su sobrina a Lockleigh, y Ralph manifestó su voluntad de acompañar a las damas, siempre que su padre pudiese arreglárselas sin él. Lord Warburton le aseguró a nuestra heroína que, en el ínterin, sus hermanas vendrían a visitarla. Isabel sabía algo de las hermanas, ya que lo había sondeado sobre muchas cuestiones referentes a su familia, en el transcurso de las horas que pasaron juntos mientras él estaba en Gardencourt. Cuando Isabel estaba interesada en algo, hacía un sinfín de preguntas, y como su interlocutor era conversador locuaz, en esta ocasión su curiosidad no cayó en saco roto. Él le contó que tenía cuatro hermanas y dos hermanos, y que habían perdido a ambos padres. Los hermanos y hermanas eran muy buena gente. «No es que sean especialmente inteligentes, sabe —le dijo—, pero sí muy buenos y agradables.» Y llevó su bondad al extremo de desear que la señorita Archer llegase a conocerlos bien. Uno de los hermanos había abrazado la carrera eclesiástica y se había establecido en la propiedad familiar, allí en Lockleigh, que era una parroquia muy poblada y extensa, y era una excelente persona, si bien pensaba de manera muy diferente a la suya sobre todo asunto imaginable. Y a continuación lord Warburton había mencionado algunas de las opiniones sostenidas por su hermano, que eran opiniones que Isabel había oído expresar con frecuencia y que imaginaba que eran compartidas por gran parte de la humanidad. De hecho, supuso que muchas de ellas habían sido compartidas incluso por ella misma, hasta que él le aseguró que estaba completamente equivocada, que era realmente imposible, que sin duda se había imaginado compartirlas, pero que podía estar segura de que si se detenía a examinarlas con algo de atención, se daría cuenta de que carecían de fundamento. Cuando Isabel respondió que ya había examinado con detenimiento muchas de aquellas cuestiones de las que hablaban, él declaró que ella no era sino un ejemplo más de lo que a menudo se había encontrado: el hecho de que, entre toda la gente del mundo, los estadounidenses eran con mucho los más supersticiosos. Eran todos unos tories rancios y fanáticos. No había nadie más conservador que un conservador de Estados Unidos. Allí estaban su tío y su primo como prueba; no había nada más medieval que muchas de sus opiniones; tenían ideas que la gente inglesa se avergonzaría hoy día de confesar; y además tenían el descaro, afirmó su señoría entre risas, de pretender saber más de las necesidades y problemas de la pobre e inepta Inglaterra que él, que había nacido en el país y era dueño, para su vergüenza, de una porción importante del mismo. De todo lo cual, Isabel dedujo que lord Warburton era un noble de muy nueva escuela, un reformista, un radical, y que despreciaba los antiguos usos. Su otro hermano, que estaba en el ejército en la India, era más bien indómito y testarudo, y hasta el momento no había servido para gran cosa excepto para contraer deudas que Warburton tenía que liquidar… uno de los privilegios más preciados de un hermano mayor.

—No estoy dispuesto a seguir pagando —dijo el amigo de Isabel—. Vive mil veces mejor que yo, disfruta de lujos inimaginables y se cree un caballero mucho más distinguido que yo. Soy un radical convencido, y acepto únicamente la igualdad; no acepto la superioridad de los hermanos menores.

Dos de sus cuatro hermanas, la segunda y la cuarta, estaban casadas; una de ellas había hecho, como suele decirse, muy buena boda; la otra, una solo regular. El marido de la mayor, lord Haycock, aunque muy buena persona, era por desgracia un tory espantoso; y su esposa, al igual que todas las buenas esposas inglesas, era peor que su marido. La otra había contraído matrimonio con un pequeño terrateniente de Norfolk y, pese a haberse casado hacía más bien poco, tenía ya cinco hijos. Lord Warburton informó de todos estos detalles y otros muchos a aquella joven oyente estadounidense, esforzándose en explicarlas con muchísima claridad y en diseccionar para que ella entendiese las peculiaridades de la vida inglesa. A menudo a Isabel la divertían tanta franqueza y la poca importancia que él parecía dar a la experiencia e imaginación de su interlocutora. «Me tiene por una salvaje —se decía—, se cree que nunca he visto una cuchara o un tenedor.» Y se dedicaba a hacerle preguntas ingenuas por el placer de escucharle responder con toda seriedad. Después, cuando él ya había caído en la trampa, comentaba:

—Qué lástima que no me haya visto con las pinturas de guerra y las plumas. Si hubiese sabido lo agradable que se muestra con los pobres salvajes, me habría traído mi atuendo de nativa.

Lord Warburton había recorrido Estados Unidos y sabía mucho más del país que Isabel; tuvo la gentileza de decir

que era el país más encantador del mundo, pero el recuerdo que de él guardaba parecía dar pie a la idea de que los estadounidenses en Inglaterra necesitaban que se les explicase infinidad de cosas.

—¡Ojalá la hubiese tenido a usted para explicarme cosas en Estados Unidos! —dijo—. Me sentí un tanto confundido en su país. De hecho, me encontré bastante desconcertado, y el problema era que las explicaciones me desconcertaban aún más. Sabe, creo que a menudo me daban las erróneas adrede; allá son muy listos para eso. Pero usted sí que puede fiarse de mis explicaciones: lo que yo le cuente es totalmente cierto.

De lo que al menos no cabía duda era de que se trataba de un hombre muy culto e inteligente y de que sabía prácticamente de todo. Aunque empleaba las imágenes más interesantes y excitantes, Isabel estaba convencida de que no lo hacía por exhibirse, y pese a que había disfrutado de unas oportunidades únicas y, como ella decía, se había hecho merecedor de las más grandes recompensas, estaba muy lejos de presentarlas como méritos. Había disfrutado de las mejores cosas en la vida, pero eso no le había hecho perder el sentido de la proporción. Sus cualidades eran una mezcla del efecto de una experiencia enriquecedora (¡qué fácil le había sido obtenerla!) y de una modestia en ocasiones casi infantil; y el sabor dulce y benéfico de tal mezcla, que tenía el encanto de lo ya probado, no empeoraba en absoluto al añadírsele un toque de gentileza responsable.

—Me gusta mucho tu espécimen de caballero inglés —le dijo Isabel a Ralph cuando lord Warburton se hubo marchado.

—A mí también me gusta, lo quiero de verdad —respondió Ralph—. Pero lo compadezco aún más.

Isabel lo miró con recelo.

—No entiendo, a mí me parece que ese es su único defecto: el que no se le pueda compadecer ni siquiera un poco. Parece tenerlo todo, saberlo todo, serlo todo.

—Así es, pero está muy mal —insistió Ralph.

—Supongo que no te referirás a su salud…

—No, en ese aspecto tiene una buena salud odiosa. Lo que quiero decir es que es un hombre de gran posición y está haciendo todo tipo de tonterías con ella. No se toma a sí mismo con seriedad.

—¿Es que se toma a broma?

—Mucho peor: se considera una imposición… un abuso.

—Bueno, tal vez lo sea.

—Puede que sí, aunque en conjunto no lo creo. Pero, si es ese el caso, ¿puede haber algo más digno de lástima que la conciencia de ser un abuso impuesto por manos ajenas, profundamente arraigado, pero que se duele de su propia injusticia? Yo, en su lugar, me mostraría tan solemne como una estatua de Buda. Disfruta de una posición que excita mi imaginación: grandes responsabilidades, magníficas oportunidades, enorme respeto, cuantiosa fortuna, tremendo poder y participación por derecho de cuna en los asuntos públicos de un gran país. Pero está terriblemente confuso con respecto a sí mismo, a su posición, a su poder y a todo lo habido y por haber. Es una víctima de esta época crítica: ha dejado de creer en sí mismo y no sabe en qué creer. Cuando intento decírselo (porque si yo estuviese en su piel, sabría muy bien en qué creer), me tacha de reaccionario malcriado. Creo que me considera un odioso filisteo; dice que no entiendo mi época. Y lo cierto es que la entiendo mejor que él, que ni es capaz de abolirse a sí mismo como incordio ni de mantenerse como institución.

—No parece muy desgraciado —observó Isabel.

—Puede que no; aunque, para ser hombre de gusto encantador, a menudo pasa por momentos incómodos. Pero ¿qué mérito tiene decir que un hombre con sus oportunidades no es desgraciado? Además, yo creo que sí que lo es.

—Yo no —dijo Isabel.

—Bueno —replicó su primo—, pues si no lo es debería serlo.

Por la tarde, Isabel compartió una hora con su tío en el césped, donde, como de costumbre, el anciano estaba sentado con el chal sobre las piernas y la enorme taza de té diluido en las manos. En el transcurso de la conversación, él le preguntó qué opinaba de su último visitante.

Isabel fue rápida en la respuesta:

—Creo que es encantador.

—Sí, es una persona agradable —dijo el señor Touchett—, pero no te aconsejo que te enamores de él.

—En tal caso, no lo haré; nunca me enamoraré si no es con su aprobación. Además —añadió Isabel—, mi primo me ha dibujado un retrato bastante infortunado de lord Warburton.

—¿De verdad? No sé lo que puede haberte dicho, pero no olvides que Ralph es incapaz de quedarse callado.

—Cree que su amigo es demasiado subversivo… o no lo suficiente. No acabo de entenderlo muy bien.

El anciano meneó lentamente la cabeza, sonrió y dejó la taza.

—Yo tampoco lo entiendo muy bien. Parece ir demasiado lejos, pero tal vez no lo suficiente. Da la impresión de querer acabar con muchas cosas, pero parece que quiera continuar siendo él mismo. Supongo que eso es natural, pero resulta un tanto contradictorio.

—Oh, espero que siga siendo él mismo —dijo Isabel—. Si dejara de serlo, sus amigos lo iban a echar muchísimo de menos.

—Bueno —dijo el anciano—, imagino que permanecerá en su lugar y seguirá entreteniendo a sus amigos. Yo, sin ir más lejos, lo echaría mucho de menos aquí en Gardencourt. Siempre me entretiene cuando viene de visita, y creo que él también se divierte. Existe un gran número de jóvenes como él en la buena sociedad, en este momento es lo que se lleva. Yo no sé lo que intentan hacer… a lo mejor tratan de iniciar una revolución. De cualquier forma, espero que la pospongan para cuando yo ya no esté. Verás, quieren acabar con todo lo establecido, pero yo soy un terrateniente bastante importante en este país, y no quiero que me expropien. Vine aquí porque pensaba que Inglaterra era un país seguro y para mí sería un enorme fraude que se introdujesen cambios sustanciales. Si eso sucede, será una gran decepción para muchos.

—¡Ojalá hiciesen una revolución! —exclamó Isabel—. Me encantaría ser testigo de una revolución.

—Vamos a ver —dijo su tío, con ánimo de broma—. Ya no recuerdo si estás del lado de lo antiguo o de lo moderno. Te he escuchado opiniones muy contrapuestas.

—Estoy del lado de ambos. Me parece que estoy un poco a favor de todo. En una revolución, una vez que estuviese ya en marcha, creo que declararía mi lealtad con firmeza y orgullo. Los revolucionarios despiertan muchas simpatías, y tienen ocasión de actuar con tanta exquisitez… Quiero decir, de una forma tan pintoresca.

—No sé muy bien lo que entiendes por actuar de forma pintoresca, pero a mí me parece que tú siempre actúas así, querida.

—¡Ah, qué hombre tan encantador! ¡Cómo me gustaría creerlo! —interrumpió la joven.

—Me temo que, pese a todo, por el momento aquí no vas a tener el placer de que te lleven a la guillotina con elegancia —continuó el señor Touchett—. Si lo que quieres es ver una gran revuelta, vas a tener que regalarnos con una larga visita. Si lo piensas bien, no les convendría que se les tomase al pie de la letra.

—¿A quiénes se refiere?

—Pues a lord Warburton y sus amigos… los radicales de clase alta. Por supuesto, yo solo puedo hablar de mis impresiones. Hablan de cambios, pero no creo que se den cuenta de lo que están diciendo. Verás, tú y yo sabemos lo que es vivir bajo instituciones democráticas: yo siempre me sentí muy cómodo con ellas, pero estaba acostumbrado a tenerlas desde el principio. Y, por otro lado, yo no soy un lord; tú eres una dama, querida, pero yo no tengo nada de lord. Ahora bien, creo que aquí no acaban de entenderlo del todo. Es algo que se vive cada día y a todas horas, y no creo que muchos de ellos lo fuesen a encontrar tan agradable como lo que ahora tienen. Si quieren probarlo, allá ellos, pero dudo que pongan mucho empeño.

—¿No los cree sinceros? —preguntó Isabel.

—Bueno, ellos quieren pensar que lo son —concedió el señor Touchett—, pero da la impresión de que todo se queda en pura teoría. Sus ideas radicales son una especie de divertimento; de alguna manera tienen que divertirse, y podrían tener gustos más zafios que esos. Son muy aficionados al lujo, y esas ideas progresistas probablemente sean el mayor lujo para ellos. Hacen que se sientan unos moralistas sin que ello perjudique su posición. Esta les importa muchísimo, y no dejes que ninguno de ellos te convenza de lo contrario, porque si intentaras actuar en consecuencia, te pararían los pies de inmediato.

Isabel siguió con mucha atención la argumentación que su tío iba desarrollando con su facilidad de palabra característica, y pese a no tener mucho conocimiento de la aristocracia inglesa descubrió que estaba en perfecta armonía con su impresión general de la naturaleza humana. No obstante, se sintió obligada a expresar su protesta a favor de lord Warburton.

—Yo no creo que lord Warburton sea un farsante. Me trae sin cuidado lo que sean los demás. Me gustaría ver a lord Warburton puesto a prueba.

—¡Que Dios me proteja de mis amigos! —respondió el señor Touchett—. Lord Warburton es un joven amabilísimo, una persona excelente. Tiene una renta de cien mil libras anuales. Es dueño de cincuenta mil acres del suelo de esta pequeña isla, aparte de infinidad de otras cosas. Cuenta con media docena de casas en las que vivir. Ocupa un escaño

en el Parlamento, como yo ocupo un asiento en mi comedor. Es de gustos refinados, le interesan la literatura, el arte, la ciencia y las jóvenes encantadoras. Pero, de todos ellos, el más refinado es su gusto por las nuevas ideas. Le proporciona muchísimo placer, tal vez más que ningún otro, si exceptuamos a las jóvenes. La antigua mansión que tiene por aquí… ¿cómo la llama, Lockleigh?, es muy bonita, pero en mi opinión no resulta tan agradable como esta. Pero eso no tiene importancia porque él posee muchas otras. Por lo que yo sé, sus ideas no hacen daño a nadie; y muchísimo menos a él. Y si hubiese una revolución, él saldría muy bien parado. Nadie se metería con él, lo dejarían tranquilo: les agrada a todos demasiado.

—¡Ah, ni aunque quisiera podría ser un mártir! —dijo Isabel con un suspiro—. Es una situación muy triste.

—Nunca será un mártir a no ser que tú lo conviertas en uno —dijo el anciano.

Isabel meneó la cabeza; un gesto que podría haber movido a risa, pues había en él un asomo de melancolía.

—Yo jamás convertiré en mártir a nadie.

—Y espero que tú tampoco lo seas nunca.

—Espero que no. Pero, entonces, ¿no siente usted lástima por lord Warburton como Ralph?

Su tío le dirigió una larga mirada, afable y penetrante.

—Sí, la verdad es que sí.

9

Las dos señoritas Molyneux, hermanas del noble en cuestión, fueron a visitarla, e Isabel se quedó prendada de aquellas jóvenes, que en su opinión ofrecían una estampa de lo más original. Pero lo cierto es que, cuando se las describió a su primo empleando dicho término, él declaró que no había epíteto menos adecuado que aquel para referirse a las señoritas Molyneux, ya que en Inglaterra había unas cincuenta mil jóvenes de aspecto idéntico al de ellas. Pese a verse desprovistas de aquella cualidad, las visitantes de Isabel conservaban la de tener una dulzura extrema y una apariencia tímida, y, a su modo de ver, unos ojos como dos estanques gemelos, dos círculos de «agua ornamental» dispuestos entre parterres de geranios.

«En cualquier caso, no tienen nada de morboso», se dijo nuestra heroína para sus adentros; y consideró aquello un enorme atractivo, porque a dos o tres de sus amigas de juventud, desgraciadamente, se les podía haber hecho tal acusación (de no ser por ello habrían sido encantadoras), por no mencionar que la propia Isabel había intuido en ocasiones esa misma tendencia en su persona. Las señoritas Molyneux no estaban ya en la flor de la juventud, pero conservaban una tez fresca y luminosa y una sonrisa un tanto infantil. Sí, sus ojos, que Isabel admiraba, eran redondos, plácidos y tranquilos, y sus figuras, también de una generosa redondez, iban embutidas en chaquetillas de piel de foca. Su amabilidad era mucha, tanta que casi les avergonzaba exhibirla; se mostraban un tanto intimidadas por aquella joven del otro lado del mundo y expresaban sus buenos deseos más con la mirada que con la palabra. Aun así, le manifestaron claramente que esperaban que fuese a almorzar con ellas a Lockleigh, donde vivían en compañía de su hermano, y que después siguieran viéndose muy a menudo. Se preguntaban si le agradaría quedarse a pasar allí la noche algún día: esperaban la llegada de unos invitados el día 29, así que tal vez le apeteciese ir mientras ellos se encontraban allí.

—Me temo que no se trate de nadie muy especial —dijo la mayor de las hermanas—, pero me atrevería a decir que usted nos aceptará tal como somos.

—Seguro que me parecerá una gente deliciosa. Creo que son ustedes encantadoras tal como son —respondió Isabel, que a menudo se excedía en el elogio.

Sus visitantes se sonrojaron, y su primo, una vez que se hubieron marchado, le insinuó que si les decía cosas así a aquellas pobres muchachas, iba a hacerles creer que se burlaba de ellas de forma gratuita y desmedida: estaba seguro de que aquella era la primera vez que alguien las llamaba encantadoras.

—No lo puedo evitar —respondió Isabel—. Creo que es fantástico tener ese aire tan sereno, razonable y satisfecho. Me encantaría ser así.

—¡Dios no lo quiera!

—Me refiero a tratar de imitarlas —dijo Isabel—. Estoy deseando visitarlas en su casa.

Pudo disfrutar de dicho placer unos días después, cuando, en compañía de Ralph y su madre, fue en coche a Lockleigh. Encontró a las señoritas Molyneux sentadas en un inmenso salón (más tarde se daría cuenta de que era uno de los varios que había), de una auténtica profusión de cretonas descoloridas; en esta ocasión iban vestidas de velludillo negro. A Isabel le gustaron incluso más en su casa de lo que lo habían hecho en Gardencourt, y una vez más la sorprendió su falta de morbidez. Antes le había parecido que, si de algo pecaban, era de escasa agilidad mental, pero ahora veía que eran capaces de sentir emociones profundas. Antes del almuerzo estuvo un rato a solas con ellas en un extremo del salón, mientras lord Warburton, a cierta distancia, conversaba con la señora Touchett.

—¿Es cierto que su hermano es tan radical? —preguntó Isabel.

Sabía que así era, pero, tal como hemos visto, el interés que en ella despertaba la naturaleza humana era inmenso y tenía deseos de ver cómo reaccionaban las señoritas Molyneux.

—Oh, sí, querida, es extremadamente avanzado —dijo Mildred, la hermana más joven.

—Al mismo tiempo, Warburton es muy razonable —añadió la otra.

Isabel lo observó un momento en el otro lado del salón; era evidente que estaba esforzándose en mostrarse agradable con la señora Touchett. Ralph había entablado amistad con uno de los perros ante el fuego de la chimenea, que no estaba de más, dada la temperatura del agosto inglés y la enormidad de la antigua casa.

—¿Creen que su hermano es sincero? —preguntó Isabel con una sonrisa.

—¡Claro! ¡Cómo no iba a serlo! —exclamó Mildred al instante, mientras la hermana mayor contemplaba en silencio a nuestra heroína.

—¿Creen que lograría superar la prueba?

—¿La prueba?

—Me refiero, por ejemplo, a tener que renunciar a todo esto.

—¿Renunciar a Lockleigh? —dijo la hermana mayor, recobrando al fin el habla.

—Sí, y a los otros lugares; ¿cómo se llaman?

Las dos hermanas intercambiaron entre ellas una mirada casi atemorizada.

—¿Quiere usted decir… quiere usted decir a causa de los gastos? —preguntó la más joven.

—Tal vez podría renunciar a una o dos de las casas —dijo la otra.

—¿Renunciar a cambio de nada? —preguntó Isabel.

—Yo no lo imagino renunciando a sus propiedades —aseguró la mayor.

—Ah, ¡entonces se trata de un impostor! —replicó Isabel—. ¿No creen que es una posición falsa?

Era evidente que sus interlocutoras estaban perdidas.

—¿La posición de mi hermano? —preguntó la mayor.

—Se la considera una excelente posición —dijo la hermana más joven—. Es la mejor de esta parte del condado.

—Tal vez me tomen por alguien muy irreverente —añadió Isabel, aprovechando la ocasión—. Imagino que ustedes idolatran a su hermano y que le tienen un poco de miedo.

—Admirar a un hermano es muy natural —dijo la hermana mayor con toda sencillez.

—Si lo hacen, es que debe de ser muy bueno, porque ustedes es evidente que son buenísimas.

—Es sumamente bondadoso. Nunca se sabrá todo el bien que hace.

—Y su talento —añadió Mildred—, como todo el mundo sabe, es inmenso.

—Sí, eso salta a la vista —dijo Isabel—, pero si yo estuviese en su lugar, estaría dispuesta a luchar hasta la muerte: me refiero a la herencia del pasado. Me aferraría a ella con todas mis fuerzas.

—Yo creo que uno tiene que ser liberal —contrapuso Mildred con dulzura—. Y nosotros siempre lo hemos sido, desde tiempos ancestrales.

—Ah, ya —dijo Isabel—, y les ha ido muy bien; no me extraña que les guste. Y, por lo que veo, les encantan los bordados artísticos.

Cuando, tras el almuerzo, lord Warburton le mostró la casa, le pareció muy natural que esta ofreciese un aspecto de distinguida nobleza. El interior había sido modernizado a fondo y algunos de los elementos más destacados habían perdido su pureza; pero, vista desde el jardín, aquella estructura sólida de color gris, que con el tiempo había adquirido una pátina suave y profunda, emergiendo de un foso ancho y tranquilo, se le antojó a la joven visitante un castillo de leyenda. El día era fresco y un tanto deslucido; el otoño había desgranado sus primeras notas, y la luz acuosa de los rayos del sol se proyectaba sobre los muros con resplandores borrosos e indolentes que parecían caer sobre sitios escogidos con esmero, allí donde la nostalgia de lo antiguo se hacía más patente. El hermano del anfitrión, el vicario, había asistido al almuerzo, e Isabel había charlado cinco minutos con él, tiempo suficiente para emprender la búsqueda de un profundo espíritu eclesiástico y de abandonar la empresa por inútil. Las características del vicario de Lockleigh eran una constitución atlética y robusta, un rostro cándido y natural, un apetito insaciable y una tendencia a reír de todo sin ton ni son. Isabel supo después, gracias a su primo, que antes de ordenarse había sido un gran pugilista y que todavía, en ciertas ocasiones, y por supuesto en la intimidad del círculo familiar, seguía siendo capaz de dejar tendido en el suelo a cualquier adversario. A Isabel le gustó, estaba dispuesta a que todo le gustase, pero su imaginación se vio muy desbordada al tratar de imaginárselo como fuente de consuelo espiritual. Todos los presentes, al acabar el almuerzo, salieron a pasear por los jardines, pero lord Warburton se las ingenió para apartar del resto a su invitada menos conocida y hacer el recorrido los dos a solas.

—Quiero que vea el lugar como es debido, con detenimiento —dijo—. No podría hacerlo si su atención se viese distraída por chismes sin importancia. —Su conversación (pese a contarle a Isabel muchas cosas de la casa, que tenía una historia muy curiosa) no se limitó a lo puramente arqueológico; de cuando en cuando, recaía sobre asuntos más personales, personales tanto para la joven como para él. Pero al fin, tras una pausa prolongada, retomó por un momento el tema que en apariencia les ocupaba—. ¡Ah! No sabe cuánto me alegra que le guste el viejo barracón. Me gustaría que pudiese contemplarlo más a fondo, que pudiese quedarse aquí durante algún tiempo. Por si le sirve de

aliciente, a mis hermanas les ha encantado.

—No necesito aliciente alguno —respondió Isabel—, pero me temo que no puedo comprometerme a nada. Estoy por completo a merced de mi tía.

—¡Ah! Perdóneme si le digo que no acabo de creérmelo. Estoy completamente seguro de que puede hacer lo que le apetezca.

—Siento darle esa impresión; no creo que sea una impresión muy agradable.

—Tiene la virtud de permitirme albergar esperanzas.

Y lord Warburton se detuvo un momento.

—¿Esperanzas de qué?

—De poder verla con frecuencia en un futuro.

—¡Ah! —dijo Isabel—, para disfrutar de ese placer no es preciso que esté tan terriblemente emancipada.

—Está claro que no; pero, al mismo tiempo, no creo que yo le agrade mucho a su tío.

—Está muy equivocado. Le he oído hablar en términos muy elogiosos de usted.

—Me alegra que hayan hablado de mí —dijo lord Warburton—. Sin embargo, no creo que le haga gracia que vaya mucho a Gardencourt.

—No puedo responder de los gustos de mi tío —replicó la muchacha—, pese a que debiera tenerlos en consideración en la medida de lo posible. Pero, por mi parte, me alegrará mucho verle.

—Eso es precisamente lo que quería oírle decir. Me complace que me lo diga.

—No parece muy difícil complacerle, milord —dijo Isabel.

—¡No, no es fácil complacerme! —Y tras esas palabras se detuvo un instante—. Pero la verdad es que usted me encanta, señorita Archer.

Aquellas palabras fueron pronunciadas en un tono indefinible que alarmó a la joven; le sonó a preludio de algo más serio: había oído antes aquel tono y lo reconoció. Sin embargo, por el momento, no sentía deseo alguno de que el preludio tuviese una secuela, y, con toda la despreocupación que pudo y de la forma más rápida que le permitía su estado de visible agitación, dijo:

—Me temo que no hay perspectivas de que pueda volver por aquí.

—¿Nunca?

—No diría que «nunca», no quiero ser melodramática.

—¿Puedo ir yo a verla cualquier día de la próxima semana?

—Con toda seguridad. ¿Qué podría impedírselo?

—Nada tangible. Pero nunca me siento seguro con usted. Tengo la vaga sensación de que siempre está juzgando a la gente.

—Eso no significa que usted salga perdiendo.

—Le agradezco la gentileza, pero, incluso aunque salga ganando, no es precisamente una justicia severa lo que más aprecio. ¿Piensa llevarla al extranjero la señora Touchett?

—Eso espero.

—¿Es que Inglaterra no es lo suficientemente buena para usted?

—Esa es una frase muy maquiavélica, y no merece respuesta. Quiero ver tantos países como pueda.

—Para seguir juzgando, imagino.

—Y también para disfrutar, espero.

—Sí, así es como usted más disfruta. No consigo entender qué se propone —dijo lord Warburton—. Me da la impresión de que la guíen misteriosos objetivos, designios inescrutables.

—Es usted demasiado generoso al haberse formado una teoría sobre mí a cuya altura no estoy en absoluto. ¿Tiene acaso algo de misterioso el objetivo de enriquecer el espíritu viajando al extranjero, algo que cada año se proponen y llevan a cabo, a la vista de todo el mundo, cincuenta mil compatriotas míos?

—Es imposible que pueda enriquecer más su espíritu, señorita Archer —declaró su interlocutor—. Ya cuenta usted con un instrumento formidable con el que nos mira al resto desde las alturas y nos desprecia.

—¿Despreciarlos? Se está burlando de mí —dijo Isabel muy seria.

—Bueno, usted nos considera «pintorescos», que viene a ser lo mismo. Yo, de entrada, me niego a que se me tilde de «pintoresco», no lo soy en absoluto. Que conste mi protesta.

—Esa protesta es una de las cosas más pintorescas que he oído en mi vida —respondió Isabel.

Warburton guardó un breve silencio.

—Usted solo juzga por lo externo, y no le importa nada. Lo único que le interesa es divertirse. —Aquella nota que había advertido en su voz momentos antes se dejó oír de nuevo, y mezclada con ella había ahora un claro deje de amargura, de una amargura tan gratuita e inesperada que la joven tuvo miedo de haberlo herido. Había oído con frecuencia que los ingleses eran una gente muy excéntrica, e incluso había leído a algún autor ingenioso que decía que entre las naciones románticas ellos ocupaban el último puesto. ¿Estaba lord Warburton volviéndose romántico de repente? ¿Iba a hacerle una escena, en su propia casa, cuando aquel era solo su tercer encuentro? Se tranquilizó de inmediato al pensar en sus excelentes modales, que no se habían visto afectados en absoluto por el hecho de que él hubiese rozado ya el límite del buen gusto, al expresar su admiración por una joven que había aceptado su hospitalidad. Y estaba en lo cierto al confiar en sus buenas maneras, ya que al instante, riéndose un poco y sin trazas de aquel tono que tanto la había inquietado, prosiguió—: Naturalmente, no quiero decir que se divierta usted con nimiedades. Escoge materiales excelentes: las flaquezas, las aflicciones de la naturaleza humana, las peculiaridades de las naciones.

—En cuanto a eso, en mi propia nación encontraría entretenimiento suficiente para toda una vida. Pero nos espera un largo recorrido en coche, y mi tía querrá irse pronto.

Se dio la vuelta en dirección al resto, y lord Warburton caminó en silencio a su lado. Pero antes de alcanzar a los demás, dijo:

—Iré a verla la semana próxima.

Isabel recibió una fuerte impresión, pero cuando esta empezó a desvanecerse, pensó que no podía engañarse a sí misma diciéndose que le había resultado del todo desagradable. Aun así, respondió al anuncio de él con bastante frialdad:

—Como quiera.

Y aquella frialdad no se debía a que hubiese calculado el efecto de sus palabras, juego en el que se empleaba con mucha menor frecuencia de la que sus detractores hubiesen pensado. Era producto de cierto temor.

10

El día después de su visita a Lockleigh, Isabel recibió una misiva de su amiga la señorita Stackpole, y la vista de aquel sobre, en el que aparecían juntos el matasellos de Liverpool y la ordenada caligrafía de la rápida mano de Henrietta, le produjo una viva emoción. «Aquí me tienes, mi adorada amiga —decía la señorita Stackpole—; he logrado escaparme al fin. Lo decidí solo la noche antes de abandonar Nueva York, cuando el *Interviewer* aceptó mis condiciones. Metí algunas cosas en una maleta, como un veterano periodista, y me fui en tranvía a coger el vapor. ¿Dónde te encuentras y dónde podemos reunirnos? Imagino que estarás de visita en alguno de esos castillos y que ya habrás adquirido el acento apropiado. Puede que hasta te hayas casado con un lord; casi espero que así sea, ya que quiero conocer a gente de alto rango y cuento contigo para que me presentes a unos cuantos. El *Interviewer* desea que informe sobre la nobleza. Mis primeras impresiones (de la gente en general) no son de color de rosa; pero quiero comentarlas contigo, y ya sabes que yo puedo ser muchas cosas, pero nunca superficial. Tengo además algo muy especial que contarte. Te ruego que organices el encuentro lo antes posible. Ven tú a Londres (me encantaría visitar los monumentos en tu compañía) o, si no, permíteme que sea yo la que vaya a verte, donde quiera que estés. Lo haré con sumo placer, pues ya sabes que todo me interesa y deseo ver cuanto me sea posible de la vida privada».

Isabel juzgó que era mejor no mostrarle aquella carta a su tío, pero lo puso al corriente de su contenido, y, como esperaba, él le rogó al momento que se encargase en su nombre de comunicarle a la señorita Stackpole que estaría encantado de recibirla en Gardencourt.

—Aunque sea una dama de las letras —le dijo—, imagino que, al ser estadounidense, no me dejará en ridículo como hizo aquella otra. Ella ya habrá conocido a gente como yo.

—¡Pero a nadie tan encantador! —respondió Isabel, aunque no se sentía del todo tranquila con respecto al instinto narrativo de Henrietta, que pertenecía a aquella parte del carácter de su amiga que veía con menos agrado.

No obstante, le escribió a la señorita Stackpole para comunicarle que sería muy bien recibida en casa del señor Touchett; y la vivaz joven no perdió tiempo en anunciar su inmediata llegada. Se había acercado a Londres, y fue en dicha ciudad donde tomó el tren hasta la estación más próxima a Gardencourt, donde Isabel y Ralph esperaban para recibirla.

—¿Me caerá simpática o me resultará detestable?

—Sea como sea, a ella le tendrá sin cuidado —dijo Isabel—. Le importa un comino lo que los hombres piensen de ella.

—Entonces, como hombre, seguro que no me gusta. Debe de ser una especie de monstruo. ¿Es muy fea?

—No, es realmente bonita.

—Una mujer periodista, un reportero con faldas… Siento mucha curiosidad de verla —concedió Ralph.

—Es muy fácil reírse de ella, pero no lo es tanto ser tan valiente como ella.

—En eso llevas razón. Los crímenes violentos y las agresiones a la gente exigen sin duda cierto grado de valor. ¿Crees que querrá entrevistarme?

—Ni por asomo. No te considerará lo suficientemente importante.

—Ya verás —dijo Ralph—. Enviará descripciones de todos nosotros, Bunchie incluido, a su periódico.

—Le pediré que no lo haga —respondió Isabel.

—Entonces, ¿la crees capaz?

—Totalmente.

—¿Y a pesar de eso la has convertido en tu amiga íntima?

—Yo no la he hecho mi íntima amiga, pero me gusta a pesar de sus defectos.

—Pues me temo que no va a gustarme a pesar de sus virtudes.

—Lo más probable es que te enamores de ella a los tres días.

—¿Y que publiquen mis cartas de amor en el *Interviewer*? ¡Jamás! —exclamó el joven.

El tren llegó al fin, y la señorita Stackpole, que se bajó sin tardanza, demostró ser, tal como Isabel había prometido, poseedora de una delicada belleza, si bien un tanto provinciana. Era una persona pulcra y regordeta, de mediana

estatura, rostro redondo, boca pequeña, tez delicada, con una mata de rizos castaño claro recogidos en la nuca y unos ojos muy abiertos de expresión sorprendida. El rasgo más destacado de su aspecto era la fijeza de aquella mirada, que, sin llegar a ser impertinente ni desafiante, se posaba en todo cuanto le salía al paso como si estuviese ejerciendo con plena conciencia un derecho natural. Así se posó sobre el propio Ralph, un tanto deslumbrado por el aspecto agradable y grácil de la señorita Stackpole, que indicaba que no iba a ser tan fácil como se había figurado que le resultase antipática. Se movía entre el frufrú y los relampagueos de vestiduras frescas de color blanco, y a Ralph le bastó una mirada para ver que tenía toda la firmeza, la novedad y la integridad de un primer ejemplar de periódico antes de ser doblado. Era probable que no contuviera una sola errata de la cabeza a los pies. Hablaba con voz clara y aguda, sin riqueza de matices pero sonora; sin embargo, una vez se hubo acomodado con sus acompañantes en el carruaje del señor Touchett, a Ralph le pareció que no todo en ella estaba escrito en grandes letras, en los caracteres de los atroces titulares, como él había supuesto. Sin embargo, respondió a las preguntas de Isabel, a las cuales el joven se atrevió a añadir las suyas propias, con gran lucidez. Y más tarde, en la biblioteca de Gardencourt, cuando ya había conocido al señor Touchett (su esposa no había creído necesario hacer acto de presencia), dio todavía mejor medida de la confianza que tenía en sus capacidades.

—Bien, me gustaría saber si se consideran ustedes estadounidenses o ingleses —dijo sin preámbulos—. De ese modo, podría dirigirme a ustedes en los términos adecuados.

—Háblenos como desee y le estaremos igualmente agradecidos —respondió Ralph con generosidad.

Henrietta posó los ojos en él, y había algo en ellos que le trajo a la mente unos botones grandes y brillantes, botones que habrían servido para cerrar las presillas elásticas de un receptáculo tirante: le pareció ver el reflejo de los objetos circundantes en la pupila. La expresión de un botón no suele tener nada de humana, pero había algo en la mirada de la señorita Stackpole que hizo que él, un hombre bastante pudoroso, se sintiese vagamente azorado, menos puro y más degradado de lo que le habría gustado. Cabe añadir que esa sensación, tras haber pasado uno o dos días en compañía de la señorita Stackpole, se vio considerablemente atemperada, si bien nunca llegó a desvanecerse por completo.

—Supongo que no intentará usted convencerme de que es estadounidense —dijo ella.

—Con tal de complacerla, seré inglés… ¡o turco!

—Pues si es usted capaz de cambiar de esa manera, por mí encantada —respondió la señorita Stackpole.

—Estoy seguro de que lo entiende todo y de que las diferencias de nacionalidad no suponen una barrera para usted —continuó Ralph.

La señorita Stackpole seguía con la mirada clavada en él.

—¿Se refiere usted a las lenguas extranjeras?

—Las lenguas no son nada. Me refiero al espíritu… al genio.

—No estoy muy segura de entenderle —dijo la corresponsal del *Interviewer*—, pero espero hacerlo antes de irme.

—Es lo que se llama un cosmopolita —terció Isabel.

—Eso significa que es un poco de todo y un mucho de nada. A decir verdad, para mí el patriotismo es como la caridad: empieza por la patria de uno.

—Ya, ¿pero dónde comienza esa patria, señorita Stackpole? —inquirió Ralph.

—Yo no sé dónde comienza, pero sí dónde acaba. Para mí acabó mucho antes de llegar aquí.

—¿No le gusta esto? —preguntó el señor Touchett con su voz cascada e inocente.

—Le diré, señor, que todavía no veo claro qué posición tomar. Me siento un tanto agobiada. Me sentí así durante el trayecto de Liverpool a Londres.

—Tal vez fuese en un vagón abarrotado —apuntó Ralph.

—Sí, pero iba abarrotado de amigos: un grupo de estadounidenses que conocí a bordo del vapor, un grupo encantador de Little Rock, Arkansas. Y pese a ello me sentí agobiada, como si algo me oprimiera, no sabría decir el qué. Sentí desde el mismo inicio como si no fuese a encajar en el ambiente. Pero supongo que crearé mi propio ambiente. Esa es la mejor forma para poder respirar. Aquí el entorno parece muy agradable.

—¡Y también nosotros formamos un grupo encantador! —dijo Ralph—. Espere un poco y verá.

La señorita Stackpole se mostró muy dispuesta a esperar y era evidente que estaba decidida a permanecer en Gardencourt durante un buen tiempo. Aunque dedicaba las mañanas a sus quehaceres literarios, Isabel pasaba muchas horas en compañía de su amiga, quien, una vez finalizada la tarea diaria, abominaba de la soledad, de hecho la combatía. Isabel tuvo pronto ocasión de rogarle que desistiese de describir en letra impresa los encantos de su

estancia en común, ya que la segunda mañana de su visita la descubrió ocupada en redactar para el *Interviewer* una crónica, cuyo título, escrito con toda exquisitez en aquella letra suya tan pulcra y legible (exactamente igual a la de los cuadernos de caligrafía que nuestra heroína recordaba del colegio), rezaba «Estadounidenses y Tudores: estampas de Gardencourt». La señorita Stackpole, con la mejor intención del mundo, se ofreció a leerle la crónica a Isabel, quien de inmediato hizo oír su protesta.

—No creo que debas hacer eso. No creo que debas describir este lugar.

—¿Por qué? Eso es lo que la gente quiere, y es un lugar precioso.

—Demasiado precioso para aparecer en los periódicos, y además no es lo que mi tío quiere.

—¡No lo creas! —exclamó Henriette—. Después se quedan siempre encantados.

—Mi tío no se sentirá encantado, ni tampoco mi primo. Lo considerarán una traición a su hospitalidad.

La señorita Stackpole no dio muestra alguna de confusión; se limitó a limpiar la pluma, con mucho cuidado, en un elegante utensilio que tenía para ese fin, y guardó el manuscrito.

—Por supuesto, no lo haré si tú no lo apruebas, pero estoy sacrificando un tema muy bueno.

—Hay un sinfín de temas, tienes multitud de temas para escoger a tu alrededor. Haremos unas cuantas excursiones; te mostraré unos paisajes encantadores.

—Los paisajes no son mi fuerte; necesito siempre algo de interés humano. Tú sabes que soy profundamente humana, Isabel; siempre lo he sido —replicó la señorita Stackpole—. Pensaba hablar de tu primo, el estadounidense desarraigado. En este momento hay una gran demanda sobre el tema del estadounidense desarraigado, y tu primo es un ejemplar excelente. Lo habría tratado con mucho rigor.

—¡Y él se habría muerto si lo hicieses! —exclamó Isabel—. Y no por el rigor, sino por la publicidad.

—Bueno, no me habría importado matarlo un poquito. Y me habría encantado describir a tu tío, que me parece un tipo mucho más noble, el estadounidense que sigue siendo fiel. Es un anciano estupendo, no veo cómo podría poner objeciones a que yo le rinda homenaje.

Isabel miró a su amiga llena de perplejidad; le resultaba extraño que una personalidad en la que hallaba tanto digno de estima cayese en aquellos errores.

—Mi pobre Henrietta —dijo—, careces por completo de sentido de la intimidad.

Henrietta enrojeció violentamente, y por un momento el brillo de sus ojos se empañó, mientras Isabel la encontraba más inconsecuente que nunca.

—Eres muy injusta conmigo —dijo la señorita Stackpole, haciendo acopio de dignidad—. ¡Jamás he escrito ni una sola palabra sobre mí!

—De eso tengo constancia absoluta, pero me parece a mí que uno también tiene que hacer ese pudor extensible a los demás.

—¡Qué frase tan buena! —exclamó Henrietta al tiempo que tomaba de nuevo la pluma—. Déjame que la anote para utilizarla en alguna ocasión.

Era una mujer de muy buen carácter, y media hora más tarde estaba de nuevo del buen humor que cabe esperar en una periodista necesitada de material.

—He prometido tratar la faceta social —le dijo a Isabel—, pero ¿cómo puedo hacerlo si no consigo ideas? Ya que no puedo escribir sobre este lugar, ¿conoces algún otro que sí pueda describir?

Isabel prometió pensarlo, y al día siguiente, en conversación con su amiga, mencionó por azar su visita a la vieja mansión de lord Warburton.

—¡Tienes que llevarme allí! ¡Ese sitio me vendría de perlas! —exclamó la señorita Stackpole—. Así podría echar un vistazo de cerca a la aristocracia.

—Yo no puedo llevarte allá —dijo Isabel—, pero lord Warburton va a venir aquí, y tendrás ocasión de verlo y observarlo. Pero si tu intención es reproducir su conversación, puedes estar segura de que lo pondré sobre aviso.

—No lo hagas —suplicó su interlocutora—, quiero que se muestre natural.

—Un inglés nunca es tan natural como cuando se muerde la lengua —declaró Isabel.

Al cabo de tres días, no parecía que su primo, como ella había profetizado, hubiese perdido la cabeza por la joven visitante, aunque sí es cierto que había pasado mucho tiempo en su compañía. Recorrían juntos los jardines y se sentaban bajo los árboles, y por la tarde, cuando era una verdadera delicia dejarse llevar flotando por el Támesis río abajo, la señorita Stackpole ocupaba un lugar en la lancha en la que hasta entonces Ralph solo había tenido una única acompañante. Henrietta demostró ser de algún modo menos susceptible de quedar reducida a una mera

presencia placentera de lo que Ralph había supuesto, acostumbrado como estaba a la perfecta integración de su prima, ya que la corresponsal del *Interviewer* provocaba en él hilaridad, y hacía mucho tiempo que él había decidido que la risa *in crescendo* iba a constituir el solaz de sus días de decadencia. Henrietta, por su parte, no justificaba por completo la afirmación de Isabel con respecto a su indiferencia ante la opinión masculina, ya que parecía que el pobre Ralph le plantease una especie de problema incómodo, que sería casi inmoral no resolver.

—¿A qué se dedica? —le preguntó a Isabel la primera noche tras su llegada—. ¿Es que no hace otra cosa en todo el día que andar de un lado para otro con las manos en los bolsillos?

—No hace nada —sonrió Isabel—. Es un caballero de abundantes recursos.

—Pues a mí eso me parece sencillamente vergonzoso, teniendo en cuenta que yo tengo que trabajar como una mula —replicó la señorita Stackpole—. Me encantaría ponerlo en evidencia.

—Tiene muy mala salud, no está en condiciones de trabajar —se apresuró a añadir Isabel.

—¡Bah, no te creas semejante cosa! Yo bien trabajo cuando estoy enferma —exclamó su amiga.

Luego, cuando se subió al bote para la excursión por el río, le comentó a Ralph que suponía que él la detestaba y que tendría ganas de ahogarla.

—Ah, no —dijo Ralph—, a mis víctimas les reservo una tortura más lenta. ¡Y usted sería una víctima muy interesante!

—Bueno, debo confesarle que sí que me tortura. Pero yo hago que se tambaleen sus prejuicios, y eso me consuela.

—¿Mis prejuicios? Yo no tengo ni un mal prejuicio que me adorne. Soy todo un ejemplo de pobreza intelectual.

—Pues peor para usted; yo tengo algunos exquisitos. Está claro que le fastidio el galanteo, o como usted quiera llamarlo, con su prima; pero eso me trae sin cuidado, ya que le estoy haciendo a ella el favor de dejarlo en evidencia. Así verá lo endeble que es usted.

—¡Adelante, déjeme en evidencia! —exclamó Ralph—. Muy poca gente se molestaría en hacerlo.

Para lograr tal propósito, la señorita Stackpole parecía no escatimar medios, echando mano cada vez que tenía ocasión del recurso de preguntar. Al día siguiente hacía mal tiempo, y por la tarde el joven, con el fin de procurarle algo de entretenimiento dentro de casa, se ofreció a mostrarle los cuadros. Henrietta recorrió la larga galería a su lado, mientras él iba indicándole las principales obras y hablando de los pintores y los temas. La señorita Stackpole examinó las pinturas en absoluto silencio, sin comprometerse a expresar opinión alguna, y a Ralph le congratuló el hecho de que no profiriese ninguna de aquellas manidas exclamaciones de placer en las que tan pródigos solían ser los visitantes de Gardencourt. Era justo decir que aquella joven era muy poco inclinada a utilizar términos convencionales; había en su tono algo serio y original que, a veces, con su deliberada precisión, recordaba el de una persona muy culta al hablar un idioma extranjero. Ralph Touchett supo con posterioridad que en una época ella había trabajado como crítica de arte para un periódico del Nuevo Mundo, pese a lo cual no parecía guardar en el bolsillo la calderilla de la admiración. De pronto, cuando Ralph acababa de reclamar su atención hacia un precioso cuadro de Constable, se volvió hacia él y lo examinó como si de una pintura se tratase.

—¿Pasa siempre así su tiempo? —le preguntó.

—Rara vez lo paso de forma tan agradable.

—No, ya sabe a qué me refiero… sin ocupación fija.

—Ah —dijo Ralph—, soy el más ocioso de los mortales.

La señorita Stackpole dirigió de nuevo la mirada al cuadro de Constable, y Ralph reclamó su atención hacia una pequeña pintura de Lancret colgada cerca; representaba a un caballero de jubón y calzas rojas y gorguera, que estaba apoyado en el pedestal de la estatua de una ninfa en un jardín y tocaba la guitarra para dos damas sentadas sobre la hierba.

—Ese es mi ideal de una ocupación fija —dijo.

La señorita Stackpole se volvió una vez más hacia él, y, a pesar de que había posado la mirada en el cuadro, Ralph se percató de que no había reparado en el tema y que seguía pensando en algo mucho más serio.

—No comprendo cómo no le remuerde la conciencia.

—¡Mi querida señorita, yo no tengo conciencia!

—Pues le aconsejo que se la procure. La va a necesitar la próxima vez que vaya a Estados Unidos.

—Lo más probable es que no vuelva jamás.

—¿Es que tiene vergüenza de dejarse ver?

Ralph meditó la respuesta con una leve sonrisa.

—Supongo que si uno no tiene conciencia, también carece de vergüenza.

—De lo que no carece usted es de gran aplomo —declaró Henrietta—. ¿Le parece bien renunciar a su país?

—Uno no puede renunciar a su país, de la misma forma que uno no puede renunciar a su abuela. Ambos preceden a toda elección… son elementos de la propia esencia que no pueden eliminarse.

—Supongo que eso quiere decir que lo ha intentado y ha fracasado. ¿Qué piensan aquí de usted?

—Me adoran.

—Eso será porque cede ante ellos.

—Bueno… ¡atribuya también algo a mi encanto natural!

—De su encanto natural, yo no sé nada. Si algún encanto tiene, es más bien artificial, totalmente adquirido. O al menos, al vivir aquí, se ha esforzado en adquirirlo. No estoy diciendo que lo haya logrado. De cualquier modo, es un encanto que a mí no me interesa. Procure ser útil de alguna forma, y después hablaremos.

—Muy bien, entonces, dígame qué debo hacer —dijo Ralph.

—Para empezar, volver cuanto antes a su país.

—Sí, ya veo. ¿Y después?

—Dedíquese a algo de verdad.

—Muy bien, pero ¿a qué?

—A lo que le plazca, siempre que se emplee a fondo. A una idea nueva, a una gran empresa.

—¿Es muy difícil dedicarse a algo? —preguntó Ralph.

—No, si en ello se pone el corazón.

—¡Ay, mi corazón! —dijo Ralph—. ¡Pues si depende de mi corazón…!

—¿Es que no tiene usted corazón?

—Lo tenía hace unos días, pero ahora lo he perdido.

—No es usted serio —declaró la señorita Stackpole—: ese es su problema.

Pese a todo, uno o dos días después, volvió a centrar su atención en él, y en esta ocasión atribuyó una causa muy distinta a su misteriosa perversidad.

—Ya sé lo que le ocurre, señor Touchett —dijo—. Se cree usted demasiado bueno para casarse.

—Eso pensaba yo hasta que la conocí, señorita Stackpole —respondió Ralph—; pero entonces, de repente, cambié de opinión.

—¡Ay, no! —gimió Henrietta.

—Entonces me pareció —dijo Ralph— que no era lo suficientemente bueno.

—El matrimonio lo haría mejorar. Además, es su obligación.

—¡Ah, tiene uno tantas obligaciones! ¿Es también esa una obligación?

—Por supuesto que sí. ¿Es que no lo sabía usted? Todos tenemos la obligación de casarnos.

Ralph meditó un momento; se sentía decepcionado. Había algo en la señorita Stackpole que había empezado a gustarle. Le parecía que, sin ser una mujer encantadora, era al menos una persona singular. Le faltaba distinción, pero, como había dicho Isabel, era valiente: se metía en las jaulas y hacía restallar el látigo, igual que un domador de leones con traje de lentejuelas. No la había imaginado capaz de tretas vulgares, pero aquellas últimas palabras suyas le habían sonado un tanto falsas. Cuando una joven casadera insta a contraer matrimonio a un joven sin compromiso, la explicación más clara de dicho proceder es que no lo hace por un impulso altruista.

—Ah, bueno, sobre eso habría mucho que decir —replicó Ralph.

—Puede que así sea, pero eso es lo principal. Debo decir que me parece cosa de privilegiados eso de ir solo a todas partes, como si se creyese que no existe mujer suficientemente buena para uno. ¿Es que se considera mejor que nadie en el mundo? En Estados Unidos lo normal es que la gente se case.

—Si esa es mi obligación, ¿no es acaso, por analogía, también la suya?

Los ojos de la señorita Stackpole reflejaron la luz del sol sin parpadear.

—¿Tiene usted la vana esperanza de encontrar fallos en mi razonamiento? Naturalmente que tengo el mismo derecho que cualquiera a casarme.

—Pues, en ese caso —dijo Ralph—, no voy a decir que me moleste verla soltera. Al contrario, me encanta.

—Sigue usted sin ser serio. Jamás lo será.

—¿No me tomará en serio si un día le digo que deseo poner fin a mi costumbre de andar solo por ahí?

La señorita Stackpole lo miró un momento de una forma que parecía anunciar una respuesta que técnicamente

podría considerarse alentadora. Pero, para gran sorpresa de Ralph, la expresión de su rostro se transformó de súbito en aparente alarma, incluso en enojo.

—No, ni siquiera en ese caso —le contestó con sequedad.

Y se alejó.

—No se ha despertado en mí la pasión por tu amiga —le dijo Ralph aquella noche a Isabel—, aunque esta mañana hemos estado hablando un rato del asunto.

—Y le has dicho algo que no le ha gustado —contestó la joven.

Ralph la miró perplejo.

—¿Se ha quejado de mí?

—Me ha dicho que piensa que hay algo muy rastrero en el tono que los europeos utilizan con las mujeres.

—¿Me considera europeo?

—Uno de los peores. Me ha contado que le habías dicho algo que un estadounidense jamás habría dicho. Pero no lo repitió.

Ralph se permitió el lujo de echarse a reír.

—Es una persona muy contradictoria. ¿Es que ha pensado que estaba cortejándola?

—No, creo que eso lo hacen hasta los estadounidenses. Pero, al parecer, ha pensado que tú no habías entendido bien la intención de algo que ella había dicho, y que lo habías interpretado mal.

—He pensado que me estaba proponiendo matrimonio y la he aceptado. ¿Qué tiene eso de malo?

Isabel sonrió.

—Para mí, mucho. Yo no quiero que te cases.

—Querida prima, ¿qué puede hacer uno con vosotras? —inquirió Ralph—. Según la señorita Stackpole, para mí casarme es un deber ineludible, y el de ella, en general, es velar por que yo lo cumpla.

—Ella tiene un gran sentido del deber —dijo Isabel con gravedad—. Vaya si lo tiene, y es el motivo de todo cuanto dice. Eso es lo que me gusta de ella. Cree que es indigno de ti guardarte tantas cosas para ti solo. Eso es lo que quería expresar. Si pensabas que lo que trataba era de… de atraerte, te has confundido de medio a medio.

—Es cierto que resultaba una manera un tanto extraña, pero sí que he pensado que estaba tratando de atraerme. Perdona mi depravación.

—Eres muy vanidoso. Ella no tenía ninguna idea interesada, ni ha supuesto en ningún momento que tú se la ibas a atribuir.

—Entonces, hay que ser muy modesto para hablar con esa clase de mujeres —dijo Ralph con humildad—. Pero es una clase muy extraña. Demasiado personal, teniendo en cuenta que ella espera que los demás no lo sean. De las que entran sin llamar a la puerta.

—Sí —reconoció Isabel—, no reconoce en absoluto la existencia de las aldabas; es más, estoy segura de que las considera un ornamento pretencioso. Cree que uno debe dejar la puerta entreabierta. Pero aun así me sigue gustando.

—Y a mí me sigue pareciendo que se toma demasiadas confianzas —replicó Ralph, quien, como es natural, se sentía un tanto molesto ante la idea de haberse equivocado por partida doble con respecto a la señorita Stackpole.

—Bueno —dijo Isabel sonriente—, me temo que a mí me gusta precisamente por ser un tanto vulgar.

—¡Cuánto le halagarían tus razones!

—Si tuviera que contárselo, no lo expresaría de esa forma. Le diría que es porque hay en ella algo del «pueblo».

—¿Qué sabes tú del pueblo? Y, ya puestos, ¿qué sabe ella?

—Ella sabe mucho, y yo sé lo suficiente para pensar que ella es como una emanación de la gran democracia… del continente, del país, de la nación. No estoy diciendo que en ella se compendie todo, eso sería pedirle demasiado. Pero es lo que sugiere, lo que representa de forma vívida.

—A ti te gusta por motivos patrióticos. Mucho me temo que sean esas mismas las razones por las que yo le pongo reparos.

—¡Ah! —dijo Isabel con una especie de suspiro de júbilo—. ¡Hay tantas cosas que me gustan! Si algo me afecta con cierta intensidad, yo lo acepto. No quiero parecer presuntuosa, pero supongo que soy un tanto versátil. Me gusta que la gente sea completamente distinta de Henrietta, como las hermanas de lord Warburton, por ejemplo. Mientras contemplo a las señoritas Molyneux, tengo la impresión de que son la encarnación de un ideal. Pero aparece Henrietta, y de inmediato la que me convence es ella, no tanto por lo que se refiere a sí misma, sino con respecto a todo lo que hay detrás de ella.

—¡Ah! Te refieres a lo que se aprecia de ella vista por detrás —sugirió Ralph.

—Qué razón tiene cuando dice que jamás te tomarás nada en serio —respondió su prima—. A mí me gusta aquel país inmenso que se extiende más allá de los ríos y de las praderas, floreciente, acogedor, sin límites hasta llegar al verde Pacífico. De él parece desprenderse un olor fresco, dulce y penetrante, y la ropa de Henrietta, perdona el símil, lleva impregnado algo de ese olor.

Isabel se ruborizó ligeramente al concluir su discurso, y aquel rubor, junto con el ardor momentáneo que había puesto en sus palabras, le sentaba tan bien que Ralph se la quedó mirando sonriente un momento cuando terminó de hablar.

—Yo no estoy seguro de que el Pacífico sea tan verde —dijo—, pero tú eres una joven de gran imaginación. Henrietta, sin embargo, a lo que huele es a Futuro… ¡tanto que casi lo tumba a uno de espaldas!

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Tras lo sucedido, Ralph adoptó la resolución de no malinterpretar las palabras de la señorita Stackpole, ni siquiera cuando parecía meterse de lleno en el terreno de lo personal. Se dijo a sí mismo que, para ella, las personas eran unos organismos simples y homogéneos, y que él, por su parte, era un representante demasiado corrompido de la naturaleza humana para arrogarse el derecho de tratarla con estricta reciprocidad. Puso en práctica su decisión con infinito tacto, y la joven periodista, tras reanudar el contacto con él, no encontró escollo alguno para ejercitar su habilidad para la indagación insaciable, para la aplicación general de su confianza en sí misma. Así pues, dado el gran aprecio que como ya hemos visto sentía Isabel por ella, y el que la propia Henrietta experimentaba hacia aquella inteligencia ágil que, a su juicio, hacía de la persona de Isabel un alma gemela, así como hacia la venerable figura del señor Touchett, cuyo noble talante, como ella decía, contaba con su total aprobación, su situación en Gardencourt habría sido de lo más cómoda de no haberse despertado en su interior una desconfianza irresistible hacia aquella pequeña dama a la que en un principio se había supuesto obligada a «reconocer» como la señora de la casa. Muy pronto, a decir verdad, había descubierto que dicha obligación era de lo más liviana y que a la señora Touchett le importaba muy poco cómo se comportase la señorita Stackpole. La señora Touchett la había calificado ante Isabel de aventurera y aburrida a la vez: las aventureras solían resultar más interesantes. También había expresado cierta sorpresa ante el hecho de que su sobrina hubiese elegido una amiga así, aunque al momento añadió que tenía claro que las amistades de Isabel eran asunto suyo, y que ella jamás se había propuesto que todas fuesen de su gusto ni que la joven se limitase a tratar con aquellas que a su tía le agradaban.

—Si únicamente pudieses ver a la gente que a mí me gusta, querida, tendrías muy poca vida social —reconoció con franqueza la señora Touchett—, y no creo que haya un solo hombre o mujer que me gusten lo suficiente para recomendártelos. Eso de recomendar a alguien es un asunto muy serio. A mí no me agrada la señorita Stackpole, todo en ella me desagrada: habla excesivamente alto y la mira a una como si una quisiera mirarla a ella… lo cual no es cierto. Estoy segura de que ha vivido toda su vida en una casa de huéspedes, y yo detesto los modales y libertades de esos sitios. Si me preguntas si prefiero mis propios modales, que sin duda encuentras atroces, te diré que los prefiero con mucho. La señorita Stackpole sabe que yo detesto esa civilización de casa de huéspedes, y me detesta por hacerlo, pues ella cree que es la más selecta del mundo. Gardencourt le gustaría muchísimo más si fuese una casa de huéspedes. En mi opinión, se asemeja casi en exceso a una. Por lo tanto, jamás nos entenderemos, y no tiene sentido intentarlo.

La señora Touchett acertaba al pensar que Henrietta desaprobaba su persona, pero no había puesto del todo el dedo sobre la llaga. Uno o dos días después de la llegada de la señorita Stackpole había expresado unas opiniones muy desfavorables sobre los hoteles de Estados Unidos, y ello suscitó una encendida contrarréplica de la corresponsal del *Interviewer*, quien, debido a su profesión, estaba familiarizada con todo tipo de alojamientos del mundo occidental. Henrietta expresó su opinión de que los hoteles de Estados Unidos eran los mejores del mundo, y la señora Touchett, que tenía aún fresca su última confrontación con ellos, manifestó su convicción de que eran los peores. Ralph, en una tentativa cordial para intentar zanjar la cuestión, señaló que la verdad estaba en el punto medio entre ambos extremos y que los establecimientos en cuestión merecían la clasificación de regulares. Sin embargo, la señorita Stackpole rechazó con desdén semejante contribución al debate. Cómo que regulares. Si no eran los mejores del mundo, que fuesen los peores, pero los hoteles de Estados Unidos no tenían nada de mediocres.

—Es evidente que juzgamos desde puntos de vista diferentes —dijo la señora Touchett—. A mí me gusta que me traten como a un individuo; a usted como miembro de un grupo.

—No entiendo lo que quiere decir —contestó Henrietta—. A mí me gusta que me traten como a una dama estadounidense.

—¡Pobres damas estadounidenses! —exclamó entre risas la señora Touchett—. Son esclavas de esclavos.

—Son compañeras de hombres libres —replicó Henrietta.

—Son compañeras de sus criados, de la doncella irlandesa y del mozo de comedor negro. Comparten su trabajo.

—¿Está usted llamando «esclavos» al servicio doméstico de una familia estadounidense? —inquirió la señorita

Stackpole—. Si es así como desea que se los trate, no me extraña que no le guste Estados Unidos.

—Cuando no se tienen buenos criados, se pasa fatal —dijo la señora Touchett con serenidad—. En Estados Unidos son muy malos, pero yo tengo cinco perfectos en Florencia.

—No sé para qué necesita tener cinco —no pudo evitar observar Henrietta—. No creo que a mí me gustase ver a cinco personas a mi alrededor en una posición tan servil.

—Yo prefiero verlas en esa posición que en algunas otras —declaró la señora Touchett con evidente intención.

—¿Te gustaría más si fuera tu mayordomo, querida? —preguntó su marido.

—No creo que pudieras serlo: te falta porte.

—Las compañeras de hombres libres… eso me gusta, señorita Stackpole —dijo Ralph—. Es una descripción preciosa.

—Cuando hablaba de hombres libres, no me refería a usted, señor.

Y esa fue toda la recompensa que obtuvo Ralph por su cumplido. La señorita Stackpole estaba perpleja; era evidente que pensaba que había algo alevoso en aquel aprecio que la señora Touchett mostraba hacia una clase que ella en privado consideraba una misteriosa supervivencia del feudalismo. Tal vez porque su mente se sintiese oprimida por aquella imagen, dejó pasar unos días antes de buscar la ocasión de decirle a Isabel:

—Mi querida amiga, me pregunto si no estarás volviéndote desleal.

—¿Desleal? ¿Desleal hacia ti, Henrietta?

—No, eso sería muy doloroso; pero no se trata de eso.

—¿Desleal con mi país, entonces?

—¡Ah!, espero que eso no ocurra jamás. Cuando te escribí desde Liverpool, te dije que tenía algo muy especial que contarte. Nunca me has preguntado de qué se trataba. ¿Es porque has sospechado qué era?

—¿Sospechado el qué? Por lo general, no suelo sospechar de nada —dijo Isabel—. Ahora recuerdo esa frase de tu carta, pero te confieso que la había olvidado. ¿Qué tienes que contarme?

Henrietta pareció decepcionada, y su mirada fija lo dejó entrever.

—No lo preguntas como deberías… como si no fuera algo importante. Has cambiado… estás pensando en otras cosas.

—Dime de qué se trata, y pensaré en ello.

—¿De verdad que pensarás en ello? Me gustaría estar segura de eso.

—No tengo mucho control sobre mis pensamientos, pero haré lo que esté en mi mano —dijo Isabel. Henrietta la miró, en silencio, durante un rato que puso a prueba la paciencia de Isabel, hasta que por fin nuestra heroína preguntó—: ¿Me estás diciendo que vas a casarte?

—No hasta que haya visto Europa —dijo la señorita Stackpole—. ¿De qué te ríes? —prosiguió—. Lo que quiero decir es que el señor Goodwood vino en el barco conmigo.

—¡Ah! —fue la respuesta de Isabel.

—Ya lo puedes bien decir. Hablé mucho con él: ha venido a buscarte.

—¿Te dijo él eso?

—No, él no me dijo nada. Por eso lo supe —dijo Henrietta con ingenio—. Él apenas dijo nada de ti, pero yo hablé muchísimo.

Isabel esperó. Ante la mención del nombre del señor Goodwood, había palidecido un poco.

—Siento mucho que tuvieras que hacer eso —comentó al fin.

—Fue todo un placer para mí, y me agradó la forma en que me escuchaba. Podría haber estado hablando mucho tiempo con un oyente así: estaba tan callado, tan absorto, no perdía palabra.

—¿Qué le dijiste de mí? —preguntó Isabel.

—Le dije que, en conjunto, eras el ser más admirable que conocía.

—Siento muchísimo que lo hayas hecho. Él ya tiene una opinión excesivamente buena de mí, no tendrías que haberlo alentado en eso.

—Se muere por un poco de aliento. Ahora mismo estoy viendo su rostro, y su mirada intensa y absorta mientras yo hablaba. Nunca un hombre tan feo me pareció tan guapo.

—Él es de ideas muy simples —dijo Isabel—. Y tampoco es tan feo.

—No hay nada que simplifique más que una gran pasión.

—La suya no es una gran pasión, estoy muy segura de que no lo es.

—Lo dices como si no estuvieras tan segura.

Isabel le dedicó una sonrisa más bien fría.

—Se lo diré mejor al señor Goodwood en persona.

—Pronto tendrás la oportunidad —dijo Henrietta. Isabel no respondió ante tal declaración, que su amiga había hecho con gran convencimiento—. Va a encontrarte muy cambiada —insistió—. El ambiente que te rodea te ha afectado.

—Probablemente. A mí todo me afecta.

—¡Todo menos el señor Goodwood! —exclamó la señorita Stackpole con una risa un tanto áspera.

Isabel ni siquiera se molestó en sonreír, y tras un momento preguntó:

—¿Te pidió que hablases conmigo?

—No lo hizo con palabras, pero me lo rogó con la mirada y con el apretón de manos que me dio al despedirse.

—Te agradezco que lo hayas hecho —dijo Isabel, y se dio la vuelta.

—Sí, estás cambiada. Aquí has adquirido ideas nuevas —continuó su amiga.

—Eso espero —dijo Isabel—. Hay que adquirir todas las ideas nuevas que sea posible.

—Sí, pero no deberían interferir con las antiguas, cuando aquellas eran las correctas.

Isabel se giró de nuevo.

—¡Si lo que intentas decir es que yo albergaba alguna idea con respecto al señor Goodwood…!

Pero, ante la mirada implacable de su amiga, la voz se le quebró.

—Mi querida niña, no hay duda de que le hiciste concebir esperanzas.

Isabel dio muestras al instante de querer negar tal acusación, pero en vez de eso respondió finalmente:

—Es muy cierto, sí que lo alenté.

Y a continuación le preguntó a su interlocutora si el señor Goodwood le había comunicado lo que pensaba hacer. Era una concesión a su propia curiosidad, ya que no le gustaba hablar de aquel asunto y consideraba que Henrietta carecía de la debida delicadeza.

—Se lo pregunté, y me contestó que no pensaba hacer nada —respondió la señorita Stackpole—. Pero yo no lo creo. Él no es de los que no hacen nada. Es un hombre de acción, decidido y audaz. Pase lo que pase, siempre hará algo; y haga lo que haga, siempre estará bien.

—Yo soy de la misma opinión.

Puede que Henrietta careciese de la delicadeza necesaria, pero, con todo, a Isabel le conmovió oír aquella declaración.

—¡Ah, así que te importa…! —le soltó su amiga.

—Haga lo que haga, siempre estará bien —repitió Isabel—. Cuando un hombre es así de infalible, ¿qué le puede importar lo que una sienta?

—Puede que a él no le importe, pero le importa a una.

—Ya, lo que a mí me importa… no es de eso de lo que estamos hablando —dijo Isabel con una fría sonrisa.

Esta vez su interlocutora se puso seria.

—Bueno, eso no me interesa. Has cambiado. No eres la misma de hace tan solo unas semanas, y el señor Goodwood se dará cuenta. Creo que se presentará aquí cualquier día.

—Entonces, confío en que me odie —dijo Isabel.

—Ni creo que confíes en eso, ni lo creo a él capaz de semejante cosa.

Ante esta observación, nuestra heroína no replicó, dominada por la inquietud que había despertado en ella la convicción de Henrietta de que Caspar Goodwood iba a presentarse en Gardencourt. Sin embargo, se engañó a sí misma diciéndose que tal cosa era imposible, y así se lo hizo saber más tarde a su amiga. Pese a todo, durante las siguientes cuarenta y ocho horas, estuvo a la espera de oír anunciar en cualquier momento el nombre del joven. Aquella sensación la oprimía, hacía que el aire pareciese cargado, como si fuese a haber un cambio de tiempo. Y el tiempo, socialmente hablando, había sido tan agradable durante la estancia de Isabel en Gardencourt que cualquier cambio solo podía ser para peor. La incertidumbre se disipó por completo al segundo día. Había estado recorriendo el parque en compañía del sociable Bunchie, y tras pasear sin rumbo durante un rato, de forma nerviosa y lánguida a la vez, había tomado asiento en un banco del jardín a la vista de la casa, bajo una frondosa haya donde, con su vestido blanco adornado de lazos negros, ofrecía una imagen elegante y armoniosa entre las sombras oscilantes. Durante unos momentos se entretuvo hablándole al pequeño terrier, con respecto al cual la propuesta de propiedad

compartida con su primo se aplicaba con toda la imparcialidad posible, es decir, la que permitían las simpatías un tanto veleidosas e inconstantes de Bunchie. Pero en esta ocasión, por vez primera, se dio cuenta de lo limitado del intelecto del terrier, que hasta la había sorprendido por su alcance. Se le ocurrió al fin que haría bien en llevarse un libro, pues en otras épocas, cuando se sentía acongojada, había logrado, con la ayuda de un volumen bien escogido, transferir la sede de la conciencia al órgano de la razón pura. En los últimos tiempos, era imposible negarlo, la literatura semejaba una luz mortecina, e incluso después de haberse recordado a sí misma que la biblioteca de su tío estaba provista de una completa selección de aquellos autores sin los que la colección de un caballero no puede pasar, continuó inmóvil, con las manos vacías, la mirada fija en el verde y fresco césped del prado. Sus cavilaciones se vieron al fin interrumpidas por la llegada de un criado que le hizo entrega de una carta. El sobre llevaba matasellos de Londres y estaba escrito con una letra que conocía, que vio en su imaginación, tan ocupada ya por la presencia de él, con igual viveza que la voz o el rostro de su autor. La misiva resultó ser corta y puede transcribirse por completo.

Mi querida señorita Archer:

No sé si habrá tenido noticias de mi llegada a Inglaterra, pero aunque no sea así, no creo que le resulte una sorpresa. Recordará que, hace tres meses en Albany, cuando me manifestó su rechazo, yo no lo acepté y expresé mi desacuerdo. Usted, de hecho, pareció aceptar mis argumentos y admitir que la razón estaba de mi parte. Yo había ido a verla con la esperanza de que me permitiese convencerla; las razones que alimentaban mi esperanza eran las mejores. Pero usted las rebatió. Yo la encontré cambiada, y usted fue incapaz de explicarme la razón de ese cambio. Reconoció que no estaba siendo razonable, y esa fue la única concesión que hizo; pero fue una bastante pobre, porque esa no es su forma de ser. No, usted no es, y jamás será, arbitraria ni caprichosa. Por esa razón, creo que me permitirá verla de nuevo. Me dijo que yo no le resultaba desagradable, y lo creo, ya que no veo motivo para que no sea así. Siempre pensaré en usted, jamás pensaré en nadie más. He venido a Inglaterra simplemente porque usted se encuentra aquí. No podía quedarme en casa después de su marcha: odiaba el país porque usted no estaba en él. Si ahora me gusta este país, es porque la tiene a usted. Había estado antes en Inglaterra, pero nunca me ha gustado mucho. ¿No podría ir a verla durante media hora? En este momento es el deseo más ferviente de su fiel servidor,

CASPAR GOODWOOD

Isabel leyó la misiva con tan profunda atención que no se percató de los pasos que se aproximaban sobre el mullido césped. Sin embargo, al levantar la vista, mientras plegaba con gesto mecánico la carta, vio de pie ante ella a lord Warburton.

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Isabel guardó la misiva en el bolsillo y dirigió a su visitante una sonrisa de bienvenida, sin dar muestra alguna de incomodidad y un tanto sorprendida ante su frialdad.

—Me dijeron que se encontraba aquí —dijo lord Warburton—, y como no había nadie en el salón y en realidad es a usted a quien quería ver, he venido sin más demora.

Isabel se había puesto en pie; en aquel momento no tenía deseos de que se sentase a su lado.

—Ya me disponía a entrar.

—Por favor, no lo haga, es mucho más agradable aquí. He venido a caballo desde Lockleigh. Hace un día precioso.

Su sonrisa era especialmente amistosa y agradable, y todo él parecía irradiar el aura de amabilidad y bondad que habían hecho que la primera impresión que la joven había tenido de él fuese tan encantadora. El resplandor de un hermoso día de junio parecía envolver su persona.

—En ese caso, demos un paseo —dijo Isabel, que no podía librarse de la sensación de que su visitante albergaba alguna intención, y deseaba a la vez eludirla y satisfacer la curiosidad que despertaba en ella. Ya había vislumbrado esa intención en otra ocasión, y, como bien sabemos, en aquel momento le había producido cierta alarma. Dicha alarma estaba compuesta de varios elementos, no todos ellos desagradables; de hecho, se había pasado varios días analizándolos y había conseguido separar la parte agradable de la idea de que lord Warburton la estaba cortejando de aquella que le resultaba dolorosa. A algunos lectores podría parecerles que la joven era a la vez precipitada e indebidamente exigente, pero esto último, caso de ser cierta la acusación, puede servir para exonerarla de lo primero. No estaba ansiosa por convencerse a sí misma de que un importante terrateniente, como había oído llamar a lord Warburton, estuviese completamente prendado de sus encantos, pues el hecho de que él se le declarase plantearía en realidad más interrogantes de los que resolvería. Había recibido la fuerte impresión de que se trataba de un «personaje», y se había dedicado a estudiar la imagen que eso transmitía. Aun a riesgo de abundar en la demostración de la autosuficiencia de la joven, cabe añadir que había habido momentos en que la posibilidad de ser objeto de la admiración de un personaje le resultaba una agresión que rayaba en la afrenta, casi una inconveniencia. Jamás hasta ahora había conocido a un personaje; en su vida no había habido personajes en ese sentido; lo más probable era que en su tierra natal no existiese ninguno. Cuando había pensado en la eminencia individual, se la había representado como algo basado en el carácter y el ingenio, en lo que a una podría gustarle de la inteligencia y el habla de un caballero. Ella misma era todo un carácter, no podía evitar ser consciente de ello; y, hasta el momento, su visión de una conciencia completa había tenido más que ver con imágenes morales, con aspectos en los que la cuestión era si complacían a su alma sublime. Lord Warburton se erguía ante ella, rotunda y claramente, como un conjunto de atributos y poderes que no podían medirse con aquel simple rasero, sino que exigían una forma distinta de valoración, valoración para la que la joven, con su hábito de juzgar con rapidez y sin cortapisas, sentía que no contaba con la paciencia necesaria. Lord Warburton parecía exigir de ella algo que ningún otro, por así decirlo, se había atrevido a hacer. Lo que Isabel sentía era que un magnate social, político y económico había concebido un plan para introducirla en el sistema en el que él, bastante injustamente, vivía y se desenvolvía. Cierto instinto, no imperioso, sino persuasivo, le decía que opusiese resistencia, le murmuraba que ella prácticamente contaba con un sistema y una órbita propios. Le decía otras cosas además, cosas que se contradecían y confirmaban entre sí; que una joven podía hacer algo mucho peor que confiar su destino a un hombre así y que sería muy interesante ver algo de su sistema desde su propio punto de vista; que por otra parte, sin embargo, era evidente que en él había mucho que tan solo le iba a resultar una complicación constante, y que incluso en su totalidad había algo rígido y necio que lo convertiría en una carga. Además, existía un joven acabado de llegar de Estados Unidos que no tenía ningún sistema en absoluto, pero que contaba con una personalidad sobre la que era inútil tratar de convencerse a sí misma de que la impresión que había causado en su mente era ligera. La carta que llevaba en el bolsillo era suficiente recordatorio de lo contrario. No esbocen una sonrisa, me aventuro a repetir, ante esta sencilla joven de Albany que se planteaba si debía aceptar a un noble inglés antes de que él se le hubiese ofrecido y que estaba dispuesta a creer que, en general, podía conseguir algo mejor. Era persona de muy buena fe, y si bien había en su sabiduría gran cantidad de

insensatez, aquellos que la juzguen con severidad pueden tener la satisfacción de descubrir que, más adelante, se volverá sistemáticamente sabia, tan solo a costa de tal cantidad de insensatez que constituirá una apelación casi directa a la compasión.

Lord Warburton parecía bastante dispuesto a pasear, a sentarse o a hacer cualquier cosa que Isabel propusiese, y le proporcionó esa seguridad con su aire habitual de encontrarse particularmente complacido de poder poner en práctica una virtud social. Pese a todo, no lograba mantener el control de sus emociones, y mientras caminaba a su lado, en silencio, y la miraba un momento sin dejar que ella se percatase, había un punto de azoramiento en su mirada y en su risa sin sentido. Sí, es indudable, y ya que hemos hablado del tema, lo retomaremos de nuevo un instante: los ingleses son el pueblo más romántico del mundo y lord Warburton estaba a punto de darnos un ejemplo de ello. Estaba a punto de dar un paso que dejaría atónitas a todas sus amistades y que desagradaría a muchas de ellas, y que a primera vista no tenía nada de recomendable. La joven que hollaba la hierba a su lado había llegado de un extraño país de allende los mares del que él sabía mucho; los antecedentes de ella, sus relaciones, resultaban muy vagas para su mente excepto en lo que tenían de genéricos, y en este sentido se mostraban claros e intrascendentes. La señorita Archer no tenía fortuna ni esa clase de belleza que justifican a un hombre ante la multitud, y calculaba que habría pasado unas veintiséis horas en su compañía. Él había sopesado todo aquello, la contumacia de aquel impulso, que se había resistido a aprovechar las innumerables oportunidades de diluirse, y el juicio del género humano, que se manifiesta en un rápido enjuiciamiento más de la mitad de las veces: había mirado ambas cosas de frente y, a continuación, las había apartado de su pensamiento. Le importaban tan poco como el capullo de rosa que llevaba en el ojal. Da muestras de la buena fortuna de un hombre que la mayor parte de su vida se ha abstenido sin esfuerzo de resultar desagradable a sus amigos el hecho de que, cuando surge la necesidad de tomar un camino como aquel, no hay relaciones molestas que lo desacrediten.

—Espero que haya disfrutado del trayecto a caballo —dijo Isabel, que era consciente de los titubeos de su acompañante.

—Aunque solo fuese porque me ha traído hasta aquí, ya habría sido agradable.

—¿Tanto aprecio tiene usted a Gardencourt? —preguntó la joven, cada vez más segura de que él tenía intención de hacerle algún tipo de petición; deseosa de no forzarlo en caso de que titubease, y, además, de mantener toda su tranquilidad y lucidez si se decidía.

De repente fue consciente de que su situación era una de las que unas semanas atrás habría calificado de profundamente romántica: el parque de una antigua casa solariega inglesa, con la agradable presencia en primer plano de un «importante» (imaginaba ella) noble cortejando a una joven que, tras una cuidadosa inspección, resultaría tener muchas cosas en común con ella. Pero aunque en aquel momento era ella la heroína de la situación, era igualmente capaz de lograr ver la situación desde fuera.

—Gardencourt no me importa nada —dijo su acompañante—. Lo único que me importa es usted.

—Me conoce desde hace muy poco tiempo para sentirse con derecho a decir algo así, no puedo creer que esté hablando en serio.

Estas palabras de Isabel no fueron completamente sinceras, ya que no albergaba duda alguna de que así fuera. Eran simplemente un tributo al hecho, y era perfectamente consciente de ello, de que las palabras que él acababa de pronunciar habrían causado sorpresa entre la gente vulgar. Y, lo que es más, si hubiese necesitado algo para convencerla de la idea que ya se había formado de que lord Warburton no era un frívolo, el tono en que él respondió habría bastado para tal propósito.

—El derecho a algo así no se mide por el tiempo, señorita Archer, sino por el sentimiento en sí. Si tuviera que esperar tres meses, no cambiaría nada, no estaría más seguro de mis palabras de lo que lo estoy ahora. Claro que la he visto muy poco, pero mi impresión viene del primer momento que nos conocimos. Yo no perdí el tiempo, me enamoré de usted entonces. Fue a primera vista, como se dice en las novelas. Ahora sé que esa frase no es una fantasía, y tendré para siempre un mejor concepto de las novelas. Los dos días que pasé aquí lo confirmaron. Desconozco si usted tuvo alguna sospecha de lo que estaba haciendo, pero me dediqué, quiero decir mentalmente, a prestarle la mayor atención que me fue posible. Nada de lo que dijo, nada de lo que hizo me pasó inadvertido. Cuando el otro día vino a Lockleigh, o mejor dicho, cuando se marchó, ya estuve completamente seguro. Pese a todo, resolví reflexionar sobre el asunto y cuestionar mis motivos a fondo. Y lo hice; durante todos estos días no he hecho otra cosa. Yo no cometo errores en asuntos así: soy un animal muy juicioso. No me entusiasmo con facilidad, pero cuando me siento tocado, es para toda la vida. Para toda la vida, señorita Archer, para toda la vida.

Lord Warburton repitió las palabras con la voz más agradable, tierna y cariñosa que Isabel había oído jamás, al tiempo que la miraba con ojos llenos de una pasión carente de los elementos más impuros de la emoción (el arrebato, la violencia, la irracionalidad) y que ardía con la misma constancia que una lámpara en un lugar resguardado del viento. Por acuerdo tácito, mientras él hablaba habían ido lentamente aminorando el paso, hasta que al fin se detuvieron y él le tomó una mano.

—¡Ay, lord Warburton, qué poco me conoce! —dijo Isabel con mucha dulzura. Y también con mucha delicadeza apartó la mano.

—No me reproche eso; ya me produce suficiente tristeza no conocerla mejor, el que sale perdiendo soy yo. Pero eso es lo que quiero, y tengo para mí que estoy haciendo lo correcto. Si accede a ser mi esposa, la conoceré, y cuando le diga todo lo bueno que pienso de usted no podrá afirmar que lo hago por ignorancia.

—Si usted me conoce poco, yo todavía le conozco menos —dijo Isabel.

—¿Quiere decir que, a diferencia de usted, quizá no mejore al conocerme? Ah, por supuesto que eso es muy posible. Pero piense una cosa: para hablarle como lo estoy haciendo, qué empeñado debo de estar en intentar complacerla. Le gusto un poco, ¿no es verdad?

—Me gusta mucho, lord Warburton —respondió Isabel, y en aquel momento le gustaba inmensamente.

—Le agradezco que me lo diga, demuestra que no me ve como un extraño. Creo sin lugar a dudas que he cumplido con satisfacción con todas las demás obligaciones de la vida, y no sé por qué no iba a cumplir con esta, en la que me estoy ofreciendo a usted, teniendo en cuenta que me importa mucho más. Pregunte a la gente que me conoce bien; tengo amigos que hablarán a mi favor.

—No necesito las recomendaciones de sus amigos —dijo Isabel.

—Ah, eso es verdaderamente encantador de su parte. Cree en mí por usted misma.

—Por completo —declaró Isabel. Y el placer de sentir que lo hacía la iluminó interiormente.

El brillo de los ojos de su acompañante se tornó en sonrisa, y exhaló un profundo suspiro de dicha.

—¡Que pierda cuanto poseo si se equivoca al hacerlo, señorita Archer!

Isabel se preguntó si con aquello quería recordarle su riqueza, pero al instante estuvo segura de que no era así. Eso, tal como él mismo habría dicho, lo dejaba a un lado; y de hecho lo confiaba a la memoria de su interlocutor, especialmente a la de aquella a la que le estaba ofreciendo su mano. Isabel había rogado al cielo no caer presa de la agitación, y su mente estaba lo suficientemente tranquila, incluso mientras escuchaba y se preguntaba qué debía decir, como para permitirse aquella crítica casual. ¿Qué debía contestar?, se había preguntado. Su deseo más acuciante era decir algo que fuese al menos tan agradable como lo que el joven le había dicho a ella. Las palabras de él habían rebosado convicción y sintió que, por más misterioso que resultara, ella le importaba de veras.

—Le agradezco su ofrecimiento más de lo que puedo expresar con palabras —respondió al fin—. Me ha hecho un gran honor.

—¡Ay, no diga eso! —exclamó él—. Tenía miedo de que dijese algo así. No le corresponde decir algo sí. No sé por qué tiene que agradecérmelo, soy yo el que tendría que darle las gracias por escucharme: ¡un hombre al que conoce tan poco y que le suelta algo así de sopetón! Está claro que es una pregunta muy seria. Le confieso que prefiero hacerla yo a tener que responderla. Pero la forma en que me ha escuchado… el mismo hecho de que se haya dignado hacerlo… me permite concebir algunas esperanzas.

—No conciba demasiadas —dijo Isabel.

—¡Ay, señorita Archer! —murmuró su acompañante, sonriendo de nuevo en medio de su seriedad, como si una advertencia así pudiese tal vez interpretarse como producto del buen humor, de la exuberancia de la euforia.

—¿Se sorprendería usted mucho si le rogase que no abrigase esperanza alguna?

—¿Que si me sorprendería? Ignoro a qué se refiere cuando habla de sorpresa. Sería un sentimiento muchísimo peor.

Isabel echó a andar de nuevo y se mantuvo en silencio durante unos minutos.

—Estoy convencida de que la buena opinión que ya tengo de usted no haría más que mejorar si lo conociese bien. Pero de lo que no estoy tan segura es de que usted no se decepcione. Y no lo digo por falsa modestia, sino con total sinceridad.

—Estoy dispuesto a correr ese riesgo, señorita Archer —respondió su acompañante.

—Como usted bien ha dicho, es una pregunta seria, una pregunta muy difícil.

—Por supuesto, no espero que me responda de inmediato. Tómese todo el tiempo que necesite para pensarlo. Si he

de salir ganando con la espera, estaré feliz de esperar durante mucho tiempo. Lo único que no debe olvidar es que, al final, mi felicidad soñada depende de su respuesta.

—Sentiría mucho tenerlo en vilo —dijo Isabel.

—No se preocupe. Prefiero recibir una respuesta favorable dentro de seis meses que una negativa hoy mismo.

—Pero es muy probable que incluso dentro de seis meses sea incapaz de darle una que le parezca buena.

—¿Por qué no, si de verdad le gusto?

—Ah, de eso no debe tener la menor duda.

—En ese caso, no veo qué más pide usted.

—No se trata de lo que yo pida, sino de lo que pueda dar. No creo que yo le convenga a usted, de verdad que no lo creo.

—Eso no tiene por qué preocuparle, es asunto mío. Usted no tiene por qué ser más papista que el Papa.

—No sé trata solo de eso —dijo Isabel—, es que no estoy segura de querer casarme con nadie.

—Es muy probable. No me cabe duda de que muchas grandes mujeres empiezan diciendo lo mismo —declaró el lord, quien, que quede claro, no creía en absoluto en aquel axioma que la ansiedad le había empujado a pronunciar —. Pero con frecuencia se las convence.

—¡Ah, eso es porque lo están deseando! —E Isabel soltó una leve carcajada.

El rostro de su acompañante se ensombreció, y la contempló un momento en silencio.

—Mucho me temo que sea mi condición de inglés lo que la haga dudar —dijo al fin—. Sé que su tío piensa que debería usted casarse en su propio país.

Isabel escuchó aquella afirmación con interés. Nunca se le había pasado por la imaginación que al señor Touchett se le ocurriese hablar de su futuro matrimonial con lord Warburton.

—¿Le ha dicho él eso?

—Recuerdo que hizo ese comentario. Quizá se refiriese a los estadounidenses en general.

—Parece que a él le ha resultado muy agradable vivir en Inglaterra.

Isabel habló de una forma que podría haber parecido un tanto perversa, pero que expresaba tanto su percepción constante de la felicidad externa de su tío como su propia disposición general a eludir cualquier obligación de adoptar un punto de vista limitado.

Sus palabras dieron esperanzas a su acompañante, quien de inmediato exclamó con ardor:

—¡Ah, mi querida señorita Archer, bien sabe que la vieja Inglaterra es un gran país! Y será aún mejor cuando la hayamos acicalado un poco.

—Por favor, no la acicalen, lord Warburton. Déjenla así. Me gusta como está.

—Pues entonces, si le gusta, cada vez comprendo menos sus objeciones a lo que le propongo.

—Me temo que no seré capaz de hacerle comprender.

—Al menos debería intentarlo. Cuento con suficiente inteligencia. ¿Tiene usted miedo… miedo del clima? No habría ningún problema en vivir en otro lugar, sabe. Puede elegir el clima que le apetezca de cualquier parte del mundo.

Pronunció aquellas palabras con un ardor candoroso que fue como el abrazo de unos fuertes brazos… que fue como una fragancia que le acariciase el rostro, a través de los labios frescos y susurrantes de él, procedente de no sabía qué jardines insólitos, de qué aires perfumados. En aquel momento, hubiese dado cualquier cosa por sentir con fuerza y sin más el impulso de responderle: «Lord Warburton, creo que me es imposible hacer nada mejor en este maravilloso mundo que confiarme, con toda gratitud, a su lealtad». Pero, pese a estar absorta admirando la oportunidad que se le brindaba, consiguió retirarse a la zona más profunda y oscura de su ser, casi como una criatura salvaje atrapada en una inmensa jaula. Aquella seguridad espléndida que se le ofrecía no era la mejor que podía concebir. Lo que por fin se le ocurrió decir fue algo muy diferente, algo que posponía la necesidad de enfrentarse de veras a su crisis.

—No me considere descortés si le ruego que no hable más del asunto por hoy.

—¡Por supuesto que no! —exclamó su acompañante—. No quiero atosigarla por nada del mundo.

—Me ha dado mucho en lo que pensar, y le prometo que lo haré como merece.

—Eso es todo lo que le pido, naturalmente… y que no olvide que mi felicidad está por completo en sus manos.

Isabel escuchó aquella admonición con sumo respeto, pero al cabo de un minuto añadió:

—Debo confesarle que lo que voy a pensar es la manera de hacerle comprender que lo que me pide es imposible… la forma de que lo entienda sin hacerle sufrir.

—No existe forma de hacer eso, señorita Archer. No voy a decirle que su rechazo me matará; no voy a morirme por eso. Pero será aún peor: mi vida carecerá de sentido.

—Vivirá para casarse con una mujer mejor que yo.

—Le ruego que no diga eso —dijo lord Warburton con mucha gravedad—. No es justo para ninguno de los dos.

—Pues para casarse con alguien peor, entonces.

—Si existen mujeres mejores que usted, prefiero las malas. Eso es cuanto puedo decir —continuó él con la misma vehemencia—. Sobre gustos no hay nada escrito.

La seriedad que mostraba hizo que ella se pusiera igual de seria, y lo demostró al pedirle de nuevo que dejase aquel asunto por el momento.

—Seré yo la que hable con usted… muy pronto. Tal vez le escriba.

—Sí, lo que usted prefiera —respondió él—. Se tome el tiempo que se tome, va a parecerme muy largo, y supongo que tendré que tomármelo lo mejor que pueda.

—No voy a tenerlo en vilo; lo único que quiero es poner algo de orden en mis ideas.

Lord Warburton exhaló un melancólico suspiro y la contempló un momento, las manos a la espalda y dando pequeños golpecillos nerviosos con la fusta.

—¿Sabe que le tengo mucho miedo… a esa inteligencia suya tan notable?

El biógrafo de nuestra heroína desconoce la razón, pero aquella pregunta sobresaltó a Isabel, que fue consciente del rubor que se extendía por sus mejillas. Devolvió la mirada a lord Warburton un momento y a continuación, con una nota en su voz que casi podría haberlo movido a compasión, exclamó enigmáticamente:

—¡Yo también, milord!

Sin embargo, su acompañante no se inmutó; toda la capacidad de compasión que poseía la necesitaba para sí mismo.

—¡Ah! Sea misericordiosa, tenga piedad —murmuró.

—Creo que será mejor que se vaya —dijo Isabel—. Ya le escribiré.

—Muy bien; pero escriba lo que escriba, vendré a verla, sabe. —Y a continuación se levantó, pensativo, la mirada fija en la actitud vigilante de Bunchie, quien tenía aspecto de haber entendido todo cuanto se había dicho y de querer disimular su indiscreción fingiendo un repentino ataque de curiosidad por las raíces de un viejo roble—. Hay una cosa más —continuó lord Warburton—. Sabe, si no le agrada Lockleigh… si piensa que es demasiado húmedo o algo por el estilo… no tiene por qué acercarse jamás ni a cincuenta millas del lugar. Y por cierto, no es húmedo. He hecho que examinen la casa a fondo y no hay ningún problema, es totalmente segura. Pero si a usted no le apetece, no es necesario ni que se le pase por la imaginación vivir en ella. Eso no plantea ningún problema: hay muchas otras casas. Creí necesario mencionarlo porque, sabe, hay gente a la que no le gustan los fosos. Adiós.

—Yo adoro los fosos —dijo Isabel—. Adiós.

Él le tendió la mano, e Isabel le entregó un momento la suya… tiempo suficiente para que él inclinase la hermosa cabeza descubierta y la besase. A continuación, sin dejar de sacudir, con emoción contenida, la fusta de montar, se alejó con paso rápido. Estaba claro que se encontraba profundamente disgustado.

También Isabel se sentía disgustada, pero no la había afectado tanto como se habría imaginado. Lo que sentía no era una enorme responsabilidad, una gran dificultad para elegir: le parecía que en aquel asunto no había habido elección. No podía casarse con lord Warburton: la idea iba en contra de su culta ambición de explorar la vida libremente que hasta entonces había acariciado o que ahora era capaz de acariciar. Eso tenía que decírselo por escrito, tenía que convencerlo, y esa tarea era relativamente fácil. Pero lo que más la perturbaba, en el sentido de que la llenaba de asombro, era el hecho en sí de que le hubiese costado tan poco rechazar aquella espléndida «oportunidad». Pese a todos los reparos que uno le pusiese, lord Warburton le había ofrecido una magnífica oportunidad. Puede que la situación no careciese de incomodidades, que tal vez encerrase elementos opresivos y restricciones, que quizá en realidad no resultase más que anodina y opresiva, pero no cometía injusticia con su sexo al creer que diecinueve de cada veinte mujeres la habrían aceptado sin ningún remordimiento. ¿Por qué razón, entonces, a ella no le resultaba irresistible? ¿Quién era ella, qué era, para considerarse superior? ¿Qué idea de la vida, qué designios acerca del destino, qué concepto de la felicidad tenía ella que pretendían ser de más altura que aquellas elevadas y fabulosas oportunidades? Si se negaba a hacer algo como aquello, tenía que hacer grandes cosas, tenía que hacer algo superior. La pobre Isabel encontró motivos para recordarse a sí misma de vez en cuando que no debía mostrarse demasiado orgullosa, y nada podía haber más sincero que su plegaria rogando que se la librase de un

peligro semejante: el aislamiento y la soledad del orgullo tenían a su juicio el horror de un paraje desierto. Si había sido el orgullo lo que le había impedido aceptar a lord Warburton, nada tan fuera de lugar como semejante necedad; y era tan consciente de que él le gustaba que se aventuró a asegurarse a sí misma de que era el suyo un sutil sentimiento de dulce y comprensiva empatía. Lord Warburton le gustaba demasiado para casarse con él, esa era la verdad; algo le decía que en la brillante lógica de aquella proposición, desde el punto de vista de él, se ocultaba una falacia, aun cuando ella no atinase a señalar en qué consistía; y castigar a un hombre que ofrecía tanto con una esposa con propensión a la crítica sería un acto especialmente reprobable. Le había prometido que reflexionaría sobre su proposición, y cuando, una vez que él se hubo marchado, fue de nuevo hasta el banco donde la había encontrado y se sumió en profundas cavilaciones, podría parecer que no hacía sino cumplir con su promesa. Sin embargo, no era ese el caso: se estaba preguntando si no sería ella una persona remilgada, dura y fría, y cuando por fin se levantó y regresó un tanto presurosa a la casa, sentía, como le había dicho a su amigo, verdadero miedo de sí misma.

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Fue tal sentimiento y no el deseo de pedir consejo, cosa que no sentía en absoluto, lo que impulsó a Isabel a hablar con su tío de lo que había sucedido. Tenía ganas de hablar con alguien; así se sentiría más natural, más humana, y, para ese fin, su tío se le antojaba más apropiado que su tía o su amiga Henrietta. Su primo, por supuesto, podía ser su confidente; pero resultaría una situación violenta para ella confiarle aquel secreto especial a Ralph. Así pues, al día siguiente, tras el desayuno, buscó la oportunidad. Su tío jamás abandonaba sus aposentos hasta la tarde, pero recibía a sus compinches, como él decía, en su vestidor. Isabel había llegado a ocupar un lugar en el grupo así denominado, que, aparte de a ella, incluía al hijo del anciano, a su médico, a su ayuda de cámara e incluso a la señorita Stackpole. La señora Touchett no figuraba en la lista, y eso suponía un obstáculo menos para que Isabel encontrase a su anfitrión solo. Estaba sentado en una silla de compleja mecánica, ante la ventana abierta de la estancia orientada a poniente y con vistas al parque y el río, con sus periódicos y sus cartas apiladas al lado, recién acabado el minucioso aseo, y con expresión de benevolente expectación en el rostro terso y contemplativo.

Isabel fue directa al grano.

—Creo mi deber comunicarle que lord Warburton me ha pedido que me case con él. Supongo que debería decírselo a mi tía; pero me ha parecido que era mejor decírselo primero a usted.

El anciano no mostró sorpresa alguna, y le agradeció la confianza que le mostraba.

—¿Te importaría decirme si lo has aceptado? —preguntó a continuación.

—Todavía no le he dado una respuesta definitiva; me he tomado algún tiempo para pensarlo, ya que eso me parece más respetuoso, pero no voy a aceptarlo.

El señor Touchett no hizo ningún comentario al oír aquellas palabras; daba la impresión de estar pensando que, por mucho interés que pudiese tener él en el asunto desde el punto de vista social, no tenía ni voz ni voto en la cuestión.

—Bueno, ya te dije que tendrías éxito en este país. A las estadounidenses se las aprecia muchísimo.

—Muchísimo, sin duda —dijo Isabel—. Pero aun a riesgo de parecer desagradecida y carente de gusto, no creo que pueda casarme con lord Warburton.

—Bueno —prosiguió su tío—, está claro que un anciano no puede decidir por una joven. Me alegro de que no me lo preguntaras antes de tomar tu decisión. Supongo que debería decirte —añadió lentamente, pero como si careciese de importancia— que hace tres días que estoy al tanto de todo.

—¿De los propósitos de lord Warburton?

—De sus intenciones, como se dice aquí. Me escribió una carta muy agradable, informándome de todo a este respecto. ¿Te gustaría ver la carta? —preguntó el anciano amablemente.

—Gracias; creo que no me interesa. Pero me alegra que le escribiese; era lo correcto, y él siempre se asegura de hacer lo correcto.

—Vaya, vaya, me parece que sí que te gusta —declaró el señor Touchett—. No tienes por qué fingir que no es así.

—Me gusta enormemente, no me duelen prendas en reconocerlo. Pero no deseo casarme con nadie por el momento.

—Piensas que puede aparecer alguien que te guste más. Pues sí, es muy probable —dijo el señor Touchett, quien parecía deseoso de mostrar su afecto a la joven tratando de hacerle más fácil su decisión y buscando razones alegres para ello.

—No me importa si no conozco a nadie más. Lord Warburton ya me gusta lo suficiente.

Dio la apariencia de sufrir uno de aquellos repentinos cambios de opinión que a veces alarmaban e incluso desagradaban a sus interlocutores.

Su tío, sin embargo, parecía ser impermeable a aquellas impresiones.

—Es un hombre digno de admiración —añadió en un tono que podría haber parecido alentador—. Su carta ha sido una de las más agradables que he recibido desde hace semanas. Supongo que una de las razones de que me gustase es que hablaba todo el tiempo de ti; quiero decir, todo el tiempo, excepto la parte en la que se refería a sí mismo. Imagino que él ya te lo habrá contado todo.

—Me habría contado cualquier cosa que yo quisiese preguntarle —dijo Isabel.

—Pero ¿no sentiste curiosidad?

—Mi curiosidad hubiese resultado superflua… una vez tomada la decisión de rechazar su oferta.

—¿Es que no te pareció suficientemente atractiva? —inquirió el señor Touchett.

Isabel se quedó un momento en silencio.

—Supongo que fue eso —reconoció al fin—. Pero desconozco la razón.

—Por fortuna, las damas no están obligadas a explicar sus razones —dijo su tío—. Sin duda hay algo muy agradable en la idea, pero no entiendo por qué los ingleses se empeñan en querer alejarnos de nuestra tierra natal. Sé que nosotros intentamos atraerlos hacia allí, pero eso es porque nuestra población es insuficiente. Aquí, sabes, hay demasiada gente. Sin embargo, imagino que para las jóvenes encantadoras siempre habrá sitio en cualquier parte.

—Parece que para usted sí que ha habido sitio aquí —dijo Isabel, cuya mirada había estado vagando por los grandes espacios de recreo del parque.

El señor Touchett le dedicó una sonrisa consciente y sagaz.

—Si pagas por él, querida, hay sitio en todas partes. A veces pienso que he pagado demasiado por este. Quizá tú también tengas que pagar demasiado.

—Tal vez sí —contestó la joven.

Aquella idea le proporcionó algo más definido en lo que apoyarse que lo que había encontrado en el curso de sus meditaciones, y el hecho de que la sutil agudeza de su tío se identificase con su dilema parecía ser prueba de que lo que a ella le preocupaba eran las emociones naturales y razonables de la vida y que no había caído víctima de la vehemencia intelectual ni de unas vagas emociones, emociones que iban más allá de la maravillosa propuesta de lord Warburton, y que apuntaban a algo indefinido y con toda probabilidad no muy recomendable. En la medida en que lo indefinido ejercía en aquel momento una influencia sobre el comportamiento de Isabel, no se trataba de la idea, ni tan siquiera formulada, de una unión con Gaspar Goodwood; ya que, por mucho que se hubiese resistido a entregarse a las manos grandes y tranquilas de su pretendiente inglés, se encontraba cuando menos igual de alejada de la idea de permitir que el joven de Boston tomase posesión en firme de su persona. El sentimiento en el que buscó refugio tras leer su carta fue en la censura de que Goodwood hubiese venido hasta allí, ya que parte de la influencia que este ejercía sobre ella era que parecía privarla de su sensación de libertad. En la manera en que se presentaba ante ella había una imposición fuerte y desagradable, una especie de presencia insistente. Se había visto por momentos perseguida por la imagen, por el peligro, de su desaprobación, y se había preguntado, consideración que jamás había prestado en igual medida a ninguna otra persona, si él aprobaría lo que ella hacía. La dificultad estribaba en que, más que cualquier otro hombre que ella conociese, más que el pobre lord Warburton (ahora había empezado a concederle a su señoría el beneficio de dicho epíteto), Caspar Goodwood manifestaba hacia ella una energía —que Isabel ya había empezado a percibir como un poder— que brotaba de su propia naturaleza. No era en absoluto cuestión de sus «prerrogativas», sino del espíritu que habitaba aquellos ojos suyos claros y ardientes como una especie de vigía infatigable tras una ventana. Le gustase o no, él insistía, de continuo, con todo su peso y su fuerza: incluso en el trato habitual con él, había que tenerlos en cuenta. La idea de una libertad limitada le resultaba especialmente desagradable a Isabel en un momento como aquel, en el que acababa de conferir un acento personal a su independencia cuando, tras enfrentarse a aquel formidable soborno de lord Warburton, se había negado a aceptarlo. En ocasiones, Caspar Goodwood le había dado la impresión de estar alineado con su destino, de constituir el factor más recalcitrante que conocía; en momentos así se decía a sí misma que podría evadirse de él por un tiempo, pero que al final tendría que llegar a un acuerdo, acuerdo que con toda certeza resultaría favorable al joven. Su impulso había sido pertrecharse de todo aquello que la ayudara a oponer resistencia a tal obligación, y ese impulso había tenido mucho que ver en la prontitud con que había aceptado la invitación de su tía, que le había llegado cuando esperaba que el señor Goodwood se presentase de un momento a otro y cuando se alegraba de tener una respuesta a mano para lo que estaba segura de que él le iba a proponer. Cuando le había dicho en Albany, la misma tarde de la visita de la señora Touchett, que no podía en aquel momento plantearse cuestiones difíciles, deslumbrada como estaba por las inmensas perspectivas inmediatas del ofrecimiento de su tía de viajar a Europa, él había declarado que aquello no era una respuesta, y era para obtener una mejor por lo que ahora la había seguido hasta el otro lado del océano. Decirse a sí misma que Caspar Goodwood era una especie de destino sombrío puede que sea suficiente para una joven fantasiosa que tenía muchas cosas claras sobre él, pero el lector tiene derecho a una visión más nítida y precisa.

Caspar Goodwood era hijo del propietario de una conocida fábrica de hilados de algodón de Massachusetts, un caballero que había logrado amasar una considerable fortuna con su industria. Caspar estaba al frente del negocio en aquel momento y mostraba un tino y un temple que, pese a la feroz competencia y a los años difíciles, habían evitado que su prosperidad decreciese. Había recibido gran parte de su educación en la Universidad de Harvard, donde, no obstante, había destacado más como gimnasta y remero que como depositario de otros y más diversos conocimientos. Más adelante había aprendido que también una inteligencia aguda era capaz de saltar, impulsarse y tensarse; incluso batir marcas y emplearse en proezas extraordinarias. Así, había descubierto en sí mismo una visión penetrante para los misterios de la mecánica, y había inventado una mejora en el procedimiento de hilado del algodón que era utilizado en la actualidad en todas partes y que llevaba su nombre. Hasta puede que el lector haya visto dicho nombre en los periódicos en relación con tan fructífero adelanto; prueba de este hecho le había dado Caspar a Isabel al mostrarle en las columnas del *Interviewer* de Nueva York un exhaustivo artículo sobre la patente Goodwood, artículo que no había sido escrito por la señorita Stackpole, por más que ella se hubiera mostrado dispuesta a favorecer los intereses de carácter más sentimental de él. Había tareas complicadas y difíciles en las que él encontraba satisfacción; le gustaba organizar, competir, administrar; podía hacer que la gente trabajara a su dictado, creyera en él, desfilara ante él y lo justificara. Como suele decirse, en eso consiste el arte de dirigir a los hombres, que, además, en su caso, se apoyaba en una ambición audaz aunque reflexiva. Los que lo conocían bien estaban convencidos de que podía hacer cosas más importantes que dirigir una fábrica de hilados de algodón; Caspar Goodwood no tenía nada de algodonoso, y sus amigos daban por hecho que de alguna forma y en algún lugar lograría escribir su nombre en letras grandes. Pero daba la impresión de que algo enorme y confuso, algo feo y tenebroso, se cerniera sobre él: después de todo, no se encontraba en armonía con una paz acomodaticia de codicia y ganancias, un orden de cosas cuyo aliento vital era una publicidad omnipresente. A Isabel le agradaba pensar que en otros tiempos él podría haber cabalgado a lomos de un veloz corcel a través de la vorágine de una gran guerra, de una guerra como aquella de la Secesión que había ensombrecido los años conscientes de la niñez de ella y los de la incipiente juventud de él.

Le gustaba sobre todo aquella idea de que él fuese por su carácter y sus hechos un conductor de hombres, le gustaba mucho más que otros aspectos de su naturaleza y su físico. La fábrica de hilados no le importaba lo más mínimo, y la patente Goodwood la dejaba completamente fría. No es que deseara que perdiese ni una onza de su hombría, pero a veces pensaba que resultaría más agradable si, por ejemplo, tuviese una apariencia algo distinta. Tenía la mandíbula demasiado cuadrada y firme y una figura demasiado rígida y estirada, rasgos que indicaban una falta de consonancia con los ritmos más profundos de la vida. Además, veía con recelo aquella costumbre suya de vestir siempre de la misma forma; no se trataba aparentemente de que llevase de continuo la misma ropa, ya que, por el contrario, su vestimenta daba más bien la impresión de ser demasiado nueva. Pero todo parecía cortado por el mismo patrón: la hechura, el tejido eran terriblemente vulgares. En más de una ocasión, Isabel se había recordado a sí misma que aquella era una objeción muy frívola para una persona de la importancia de él, para a renglón seguido enmendar la reprobación diciéndose que sería una objeción frívola en caso de estar enamorada de él. Pero no lo estaba y, por lo tanto, podía criticar sus defectos, tanto los pequeños como los grandes, que consistían en un reproche colectivo por ser demasiado serio, o mejor, no porque lo fuese, puesto que nunca se puede ser serio en demasía, sino ciertamente por parecerlo. Mostraba sus apetitos e intenciones con demasiada claridad y sin subterfugios; cuando se estaba a solas con él, hablaba demasiado del mismo asunto, y cuando había otras personas presentes, apenas hablaba de nada. Y, pese a todo, era de constitución extraordinariamente fuerte y bien definida, lo cual ya era mucho; Isabel veía las distintas piezas que encajaban en él como había visto, en museos y cuadros, las distintas piezas que encajadas entre sí formaban la armadura de los guerreros: planchas de acero con hermosas incrustaciones de oro. Era muy extraño: ¿acaso existía algún vínculo tangible entre sus propias impresiones y sus actos? Caspar Goodwood nunca había respondido a su idea de una persona agradable, y suponía que era eso lo que la volvía tan sumamente crítica. Sin embargo, cuando lord Warburton, que no solo respondía a su idea, sino que la sobrepasaba, solicitó su aprobación, ella siguió mostrándose insatisfecha. Sin duda que era extraño.

La percepción de su incoherencia no le resultaba de ayuda para contestar a la carta del señor Goodwood, e Isabel resolvió dejarla sin respuesta por el momento. Si él estaba decidido a perseguirla, debía afrontar las consecuencias; y la principal de ellas era que se diese cuenta de lo poco que le apetecía que él apareciese por Gardencourt. Ya estaba a merced en aquel lugar de las incursiones de un pretendiente, y aunque podía resultar agradable ser apreciada en bandos opuestos, había algo grosero en entretener simultáneamente a dos pretendientes tan apasionados, incluso en

el caso de que dicho entretenimiento consistiese en rechazarlos. No dio respuesta al señor Goodwood, pero al cabo de tres días escribió a lord Warburton, y dicha carta forma parte de nuestra historia.

> Querido lord Warburton:
>
> Una reflexión profunda y prolongada no me ha llevado a cambiar de opinión acerca de la propuesta que con tanta amabilidad me planteó usted el otro día. Me veo incapaz, me resulta sinceramente imposible, considerarlo a usted como un compañero para toda la vida; o considerar su hogar, sus distintos hogares, como el centro permanente de mi existencia. Estas cosas no se pueden razonar, y le ruego muy encarecidamente que no vuelva a mencionar el asunto que tratamos tan minuciosamente. Cada uno ve su vida desde su propio punto de vista, prerrogativa de la que goza hasta el más humilde y débil de entre nosotros, y yo jamás podré ver la mía de la forma que usted me propuso. Le ruego que con esto se dé por satisfecho y que me crea cuando digo que he tratado su propuesta con todo el respeto y la profunda consideración que se merece. Con mi mayor estima, sinceramente suya,
>
> Isabel Archer

Mientras la autora de esta misiva se decidía a enviarla, Henrietta Stackpole tomó una determinación que puso en práctica sin dilación. Invitó a Ralph Touchett a dar un paseo con ella por el jardín, y cuando él había accedido con esa prontitud suya que parecía dar testimonio constante de sus elevadas expectativas, le informó de que tenía que pedirle un favor. Debemos reconocer que, al oír aquello, el joven se sobresaltó, pues como sabemos la señorita Stackpole le había dado la impresión de ser capaz de aprovechar cualquier ventaja. Sin embargo, su alarma era irracional, ya que la idea que él tenía del motivo de aquella indiscreción era igual de escasa que la información sobre su alcance en profundidad, y expresó con exquisita educación su deseo de servirla. Tenía miedo de ella, y se lo hizo saber.

—Cuando me mira de cierta manera, las rodillas me tiemblan y me abandonan mis facultades; el nerviosismo me invade y lo único que pido es tener la fuerza necesaria para cumplir sus órdenes. Tiene usted una autoridad que hasta ahora no había encontrado en ninguna mujer.

—Bueno —contestó Henrietta de buen humor—, si no hubiese sabido de antemano que estaba usted tratando de avergonzarme de algún modo, ahora estaría convencida. Está claro que soy presa fácil, me educaron con costumbres e ideas muy distintas. No estoy acostumbrada a sus normas arbitrarias, y en Estados Unidos jamás me han hablado como lo ha hecho usted. Si un caballero que estuviese conversando conmigo allá me hablase de esa manera, no entendería nada. Allá nos tomamos todo con más naturalidad que aquí y, desde luego, somos mucho más sencillos. Yo reconozco que soy muy sencilla. Si lo que quiere es reírse de mí por eso, adelante; pero, en general, prefiero ser como soy a ser como usted. Estoy bastante satisfecha conmigo misma, no quiero cambiar. Hay mucha gente que me aprecia tal como soy. ¡Estadounidenses libres y sencillos, claro! —Henrietta había adoptado un tono de indefensa inocencia y enorme condescendencia—. Quiero que me eche una mano —añadió—. No me importa que se divierta conmigo mientras lo hace, o, mejor dicho, estoy dispuesta a que su diversión sea la recompensa. Quiero que me ayude con Isabel.

—¿Es que ella la ha herido?

—Si así fuese no me importaría, y jamás se lo diría a usted. Lo que temo es que se haga daño a sí misma.

—Creo que eso es muy posible.

Su acompañante se detuvo en el sendero del jardín, y le dirigió una mirada que quizá fuese la que a él le enervaba.

—Y eso también le haría gracia, supongo. ¡Menuda forma tiene usted de decir las cosas! Jamás había conocido a nadie tan indiferente.

—¿Con respecto a Isabel? ¡Ah! ¡Eso sí que no!

—Está bien, espero que no esté enamorado de ella.

—¿Cómo podría estarlo si estoy enamorado de Otra?

—Lo que está es enamorado de sí mismo. ¡Esa es la Otra! —declaró la señorita Stackpole—. ¡Pues que le vaya bien! Pero si por una vez en la vida quiere ser serio, ahora tiene la oportunidad de demostrarlo. No espero que comprenda a Isabel, eso sería pedirle demasiado. Pero tampoco es necesario para que me haga el favor que quiero. De pensar me encargo yo.

—¡Cuánto voy a disfrutar! —exclamó Ralph—. Yo haré de Calibán y usted de Ariel.

—Usted no se parece en nada a Calibán, porque es sofisticado y Calibán no lo era. Pero yo no estoy hablando de personajes imaginarios, estoy hablando de Isabel. Isabel es de lo más real. Lo que quiero decirle es que la encuentro

tremendamente cambiada.

—¿Quiere decir desde que usted llegó?

—Desde que llegué y desde antes de que llegase. Ya no es aquella persona maravillosa de antes.

—¿Como era en Estados Unidos?

—Sí, como era en Estados Unidos. Imagino que sabrá que procede de allí. No puede evitarlo, pero así es.

—¿Y usted quiere cambiarla y que vuelva a ser la de antes?

—Por supuesto que sí, y quiero que usted me ayude.

—Ah —dijo Ralph—, yo solo soy Calibán; no soy Próspero.

—Ya ha hecho lo suficiente de Próspero para convertirla en lo que es ahora. Ha influido en Isabel Archer desde que llegó aquí, señor Touchett.

—¿Yo, mi querida señorita Stackpole? ¡Qué va! Ha sido Isabel Archer la que ha influido en mí; sí, ella nos influye a todos. Pero yo me he mantenido completamente pasivo.

—En ese caso, es usted demasiado pasivo. Más le valdría espabilarse y estar atento. Isabel cambia de día en día; se está dejando ir a la deriva, mar adentro. La he estado observando y lo sé. No es aquella brillante joven estadounidense que era antes. Está adoptando opiniones distintas, un matiz diferente, y alejándose de sus antiguos ideales. Yo quiero recuperar esos ideales, señor Touchett, y aquí es donde interviene usted.

—¿No como un ideal, por supuesto?

—Está claro que no —respondió Henrietta con prontitud—. Siento un profundo temor de que vaya a casarse con uno de esos europeos decadentes, y quiero impedirlo.

—Ah, ya entiendo —dijo Ralph—; ¿y para impedirlo lo que quiere es que yo me entrometa y me case con ella?

—No exactamente; tal remedio sería peor que la enfermedad, porque usted es uno de esos típicos europeos decadentes de los que yo quiero rescatarla. No; lo que quiero es que usted se interese por otra persona: un joven al que ella antes dio grandes esperanzas y que ahora, por lo visto, no encuentra suficientemente bueno. Es, en verdad, un gran hombre y un buen amigo al que aprecio muchísimo, y me gustaría que usted lo invitase a venir aquí.

Ralph se quedó muy desconcertado ante tal petición, y tal vez no diga mucho a favor de su pureza de espíritu el hecho de que en un principio no contemplase tal solicitud en toda su sencillez. Había en ella, a su juicio, algo tortuoso, y el error de Ralph estaba en que no tenía la seguridad de que hubiese en el mundo algo tan inocente como aparentaba ser aquella petición de la señorita Stackpole. Que una joven le pidiese dar la oportunidad a un caballero, al que describía como un amigo suyo muy querido, de hacerse grato a otra muchacha, a una joven cuya atención se había desviado y poseedora de mayores encantos… era algo tan anómalo que por el momento ponía en cuestión toda su capacidad de interpretación. Leer entre líneas resultaba más fácil que seguir el texto, y suponer que la señorita Stackpole quería que se invitase al caballero a Gardencourt por motivos propios no era indicio de una mente vulgar, sino de una que se siente azorada. Sin embargo, Ralph se vio salvado incluso de este acto de vulgaridad venial, y salvado por una fuerza a la que solo puedo calificar de inspiración. Sin más luz sobre el asunto que la que acababa de adquirir, tuvo de súbito la convicción de que sería una soberana injusticia asignar a la corresponsal del *Interviewer* un propósito deshonroso a cualquiera de sus actos. Tal convicción se adueñó de su mente con extrema rapidez, tal vez alimentada por el brillo puro de la imperturbable mirada de la joven. Respondió al desafío un momento, conscientemente, resistiéndose al impulso de fruncir el ceño como hace uno en presencia de luminarias mayores.

—¿Quién es el caballero del que habla?

—El señor Caspar Goodwood, de Boston. Ha sido extremadamente atento con Isabel, y se ha entregado a ella en cuerpo y alma. La ha seguido hasta aquí y actualmente está en Londres. No sé su dirección, pero supongo que puedo conseguirla.

—No he oído hablar nunca de él —dijo Ralph.

—Ya, pero imagino que no habrá oído hablar de todo el mundo. Yo no creo que él haya oído hablar de usted, pero ese no es motivo para que Isabel no se case con él.

Ralph soltó una carcajada leve y ambigua.

—¡Qué manía tiene usted de casar a la gente! ¿Se acuerda de que el otro día me quería casar a mí?

—Eso ya se me ha pasado. Usted no sabe cómo tomarse esas ideas. Pero, en cambio, el señor Goodwood sí que sabe hacerlo, y eso es lo que me gusta de él. Es un hombre espléndido y un perfecto caballero, e Isabel lo sabe.

—¿Lo aprecia ella mucho?

—Si no lo hace, tendría que hacerlo. Él está sencillamente cautivado por ella.

—Y usted quiere que yo lo invite a venir —dijo Ralph pensativo.

—Sería un auténtico acto de hospitalidad.

—Caspar Goodwood… —continuó Ralph—, es un nombre de lo más llamativo.

—El nombre me trae sin cuidado. Por mí como si se llamara Ezekiel Jenkins. Es el único hombre que he conocido que considero digno de Isabel.

—Es usted una amiga muy devota —dijo Ralph.

—Por supuesto que lo soy. Si lo dice por burlarse de mí, no me importa.

—No lo digo por burlarme de usted, sino porque lo encuentro admirable.

—Está usted más satírico que nunca, pero le aconsejo que no se ría del señor Goodwood.

—Le aseguro que estoy hablando muy en serio, debería usted darse cuenta —dijo Ralph.

Su interlocutora se dio cuenta enseguida.

—Creo que es cierto; ahora está usted demasiado serio.

—Es usted difícil de complacer.

—Ah, no hay duda de que se ha puesto muy serio. No va a invitar al señor Goodwood.

—No lo sé —dijo Ralph—. Soy capaz de hacer cosas muy raras. Háble me un poco del señor Goodwood. ¿Cómo es?

—Es todo lo contrario de usted. Está al frente de una fábrica de hilados de algodón, una muy importante.

—¿Tiene buenos modales? —preguntó Ralph.

—Espléndidos… a la manera de Estados Unidos.

—¿Sería un miembro agradable de nuestro pequeño círculo?

—No creo que a él le importase mucho nuestro pequeño círculo. Se concentraría en Isabel.

—¿Y le gustaría eso a mi prima?

—Lo más probable es que no le gustase en absoluto. Pero sería algo muy bueno para ella. Haría que volviesen sus ideas.

—¿Que volviesen… de dónde?

—De sitios foráneos y otros lugares poco naturales. Hace tres meses le dio motivos suficientes al señor Goodwood para suponer que lo encontraba aceptable para ella, y no es digno de Isabel echarse atrás ante un verdadero amigo por el simple hecho de haber cambiado de ambiente. También yo he cambiado de ambiente, y el efecto que me ha causado es que mis antiguas amistades me importan ahora más que nunca. Estoy segura de que, cuanto antes vuelva la Isabel de antes, mejor será. La conozco lo bastante bien para saber que aquí jamás sería feliz de verdad, y deseo que establezca un vínculo sólido con Estados Unidos que le sirva de coraza.

—¿No está tal vez precipitándose un poco? —preguntó Ralph—. ¿No cree que debería darle más oportunidades a la pobre y querida Inglaterra?

—¿La oportunidad de arruinar su brillante juventud? Nunca es demasiado pronto para evitar que se ahogue un valioso ser humano.

—Entonces, por lo que veo —dijo Ralph—, lo que usted quiere es que tire por la borda al señor Goodwood tras ella. ¿Sabe —añadió— que jamás la he oído mencionar su nombre?

Henrietta le dedicó una sonrisa radiante.

—Me encanta oír eso; demuestra lo mucho que piensa en él.

Ralph pareció aceptar que aquello tenía muchos visos de ser cierto, y se enfrascó en sus pensamientos mientras su interlocutora lo observaba de reojo.

—Si invitase al señor Goodwood —dijo al fin—, sería para pelearme con él.

—Ni se le ocurra; saldría ganando él.

—Está usted haciendo lo imposible para que lo deteste. Si le soy sincero, no creo que pueda invitarlo. Tengo miedo de mostrarme grosero con él.

—Como quiera —respondió Henrietta—. No tenía la menor idea de que estuviese usted enamorado de Isabel.

—¿De verdad cree usted eso? —preguntó el joven enarcando las cejas.

—¡Por primera vez le oigo hablar con naturalidad! Claro que lo creo —dijo la señorita Stackpole astutamente.

—Muy bien —concluyó Ralph—, para demostrarle lo equivocada que está, lo voy a invitar. Tendrá que ser, por supuesto, como amigo suyo.

—Él no vendrá en calidad de amigo mío; y usted no lo invitará para demostrar que me equivoco, si no para demostrárselo a sí mismo.

Estas últimas palabras de la señorita Stackpole, tras las cuales ambos se separaron, contenían una parte de verdad que Ralph se vio obligado a reconocer; pero rozó de forma tan superficial dicho reconocimiento que, pese a ser consciente de que podría resultar bastante más indiscreto cumplir su promesa que romperla, escribió al señor Goodwood una nota de seis líneas en la que expresaba el placer que le supondría al anciano señor Touchett que se uniese al pequeño grupo de Gardencourt, del que la señorita Stackpole era miembro distinguido. Tras enviar la misiva, a la atención de un banquero cuyo nombre le dio Henrietta, permaneció a la expectativa. Había oído nombrar a aquel nuevo e imponente personaje por primera vez, puesto que cuando su madre le había mencionado a su llegada que se rumoreaba que la joven tenía un «admirador» en su país, la idea le había parecido sin excesiva base real y no se había molestado en hacer unas preguntas cuyas respuestas no habrían resultado sino vagas o desagradables. Ahora, sin embargo, la admiración de la que era objeto su prima en su tierra natal se había convertido en algo más concreto; había cobrado la forma de un joven que la había seguido hasta Londres, que tenía intereses en una fábrica de hilados de algodón y unos espléndidos modales al estilo de Estados Unidos. Ralph se había formado dos teorías con respecto a este intruso. O bien su pasión era una ficción sentimental de la señorita Stackpole (siempre existía una especie de acuerdo tácito entre las mujeres, nacido de la solidaridad de dicho sexo, en virtud del cual se descubrirían o inventarían enamorados las unas a las otras), en cuyo caso no había por qué tener miedo del joven, ya que lo más probable era que no aceptase la invitación; o bien, sí que la aceptaría, en cuyo caso demostraría ser alguien demasiado irracional para perder más tiempo con él. Esta última premisa del argumento de Ralph podría parecer incoherente, pero expresaba su convicción de que, si el señor Goodwood estuviese interesado en Isabel tan seriamente como la señorita Stackpole había descrito, no tendría deseos de presentarse en Gardencourt reclamado por esta última dama. «En este supuesto —se dijo Ralph—, debe de considerarla una espina en el tallo de su rosa; como intercesora debe de encontrarla falta de tacto.»

Dos días después de haber enviado su invitación, recibió una nota muy breve de Caspar Goodwood en la que le daba las gracias por ella, lamentaba que otros compromisos hiciesen imposible su visita a Gardencourt y presentaba sus respetos a la señorita Stackpole. Ralph le entregó la nota a Henrietta, que, cuando la hubo leído, exclamó:

—¡Hay que ver! En mi vida he visto cosa más seca.

—Me temo que mi prima no le importe tanto como usted supone —observó Ralph.

—No, no se trata de eso, hay un motivo más sutil. Tiene un carácter muy reservado. Pero estoy decidida a descubrir la razón, y voy a escribirle para averiguar qué quiere decir.

La negativa de Goodwood a aceptar la invitación de Ralph resultaba un tanto desconcertante; desde el momento en que rehusó acudir a Gardencourt, empezó a cobrar importancia para nuestro amigo. Se preguntó a sí mismo qué le importaba a él que los admiradores de Isabel fuesen unos bandidos o unos vagos; no eran rivales suyos y por él que hiciesen lo que les viniese en gana. Pero pese a todo sintió una gran curiosidad a raíz de la promesa de la señorita Stackpole de indagar en las causas de la sequedad del señor Goodwood, curiosidad insatisfecha hasta el momento, ya que, cuando tres días más tarde le preguntó si había escrito a Londres, ella se vio obligada a confesar que lo había hecho en vano. El señor Goodwood no había respondido.

—Supongo que se lo estará pensando —dijo—; se lo piensa todo mucho; en realidad, no es nada impetuoso. Pero yo estoy acostumbrada a que respondan a mis cartas el mismo día.

De todos modos, se le ocurrió proponerle a Isabel una excursión a Londres las dos juntas.

—Si quieres que te sea sincera —observó—, aquí no tengo gran cosa que ver, y creo que tú tampoco. Ni siquiera he visto a ese aristócrata… ¿cómo se llama…? Lord Washburton. Parece que te haya dejado completamente abandonada.

—Pues resulta que me he enterado de que lord Warburton viene mañana —respondió su amiga, que había recibido una nota del señor de Lockleigh en respuesta a su carta—. Tendrás cuantas oportunidades quieras para darle un buen repaso.

—Bueno, puede que me sirva para una crónica, pero ¿qué es una crónica cuando quieres escribir cincuenta? He descrito todos los paisajes del entorno y expresado todo mi entusiasmo por las ancianas y los burros. Tú puedes decir lo que quieras, pero el paisaje no es suficiente para hacer que una crónica sea de vital importancia. Tengo que regresar a Londres para conseguir impresiones de la vida real. Estuve apenas tres días allí antes de venir, y ese no es tiempo suficiente para tomar contacto con un lugar.

Como Isabel, en el transcurso de su viaje de Nueva York a Gardencourt, había visto incluso menos de la capital británica, le pareció una magnífica ocurrencia de Henrietta que las dos fuesen allí en visita de placer. La idea le

resultó encantadora; sentía curiosidad por conocer con todo detalle la ciudad de Londres, que siempre se había representado en su imaginación como algo grande y próspero. Trazaron sus planes juntas y se deleitaron con imágenes de momentos plenos de romanticismo. Se alojarían en una casa de huéspedes antigua y pintoresca, una de esas posadas descritas por Dickens, y recorrerían la ciudad en esos encantadores coches de caballos. Henrietta era una mujer de letras, y la gran ventaja de ser una mujer de letras residía en que una podía ir a todas partes y hacer cualquier cosa. Cenarían en un café y después irían al teatro; frecuentarían la Abadía de Westminster y el Museo Británico y averiguarían dónde había vivido el doctor Johnson, y también Goldsmith y Addison. Isabel estaba cada vez más impaciente y reveló la brillante perspectiva a Ralph, quien estalló en unas carcajadas que distaban mucho de expresar la aquiescencia que ella habría deseado.

—Es un plan encantador —dijo su primo—. Os recomiendo que vayáis al Duke's Head en Covent Garden, que es un sitio anticuado, informal y distendido, y yo os inscribiré en mi club.

—¿Me estás diciendo que es un sitio poco apropiado? —preguntó Isabel—. Por Dios, ¿es que aquí no hay nada apropiado? En compañía de Henrietta sin duda puedo ir a cualquier parte; ella no tiene prejuicios en ese sentido. Ha viajado por todo el continente americano y es muy capaz de orientarse en esta isla diminuta.

—Ah, en tal caso —dijo Ralph—, deja que yo también me aproveche de su protección y vaya a la ciudad. Tal vez no vuelva a tener nunca ocasión de viajar con tanta seguridad.

14

La señorita Stackpole habría estado dispuesta a partir de inmediato, pero Isabel, como hemos visto, había tenido noticias de que lord Warburton pensaba ir de nuevo a Gardencourt, y consideró su deber quedarse allí para verlo. Durante cuatro o cinco días él no había respondido a su carta, y después le había escrito con mucha brevedad para comunicarle que iría a almorzar al cabo de dos días. Había algo en aquellas demoras y retrasos que conmovía a la joven y que reforzó su impresión de que él quería mostrarse paciente y considerado, y no parecer que la atosigaba con demasiada insistencia; una consideración tan estudiada que la convencía de que le gustaba de verdad. Isabel le contó a su tío que le había escrito a lord Warburton, mencionándole asimismo la intención que tenía de ir a visitarlos; y el anciano, en consecuencia, abandonó sus aposentos más temprano que de costumbre y apareció a las dos, hora del refrigerio. Aquel no era en modo alguno un acto de vigilancia por su parte, sino fruto del benévolo convencimiento de que su presencia en el grupo ayudaría a cubrir cualquier ausencia de la pareja si Isabel accedía a concederle a su noble visitante otra audiencia. Este personaje llegó en coche desde Lockleigh y trajo consigo a la mayor de sus hermanas, medida presumiblemente dictada por reflexiones del mismo orden que las que se había hecho el señor Touchett. Los dos visitantes fueron presentados a la señorita Stackpole, quien, durante el almuerzo, ocupó el asiento contiguo al de lord Warburton. Isabel, que estaba nerviosa y no sentía deseo alguno de discutir de nuevo la propuesta que él le había planteado tan prematuramente, no pudo por menos que admirar el buen humor que ejercía en el dominio de sí mismo, que ocultaba por completo los síntomas de la inquietud que en su presencia, como era natural, ella suponía que sentía. Él ni la miraba ni se dirigía a ella, y la única prueba de su emoción era que evitaba cruzar con ella la mirada. Sin embargo, hablaba largo y tendido con los demás y parecía dar cuenta del almuerzo con interés y apetito. La señorita Molyneux, que tenía la frente tersa como la de una monja y llevaba una gran cruz de plata colgada al cuello, estaba evidentemente interesada en Henrietta Stackpole, sobre cuya persona posaba constantemente la mirada de una forma que delataba el conflicto entre la decidida repulsa y la admiración encendida. De las dos damas de Lockleigh, era ella la que a Isabel más le había agradado: había en ella un auténtico legado de sosiego. Además, Isabel estaba convencida de que aquella frente suave y aquella cruz de plata tenían relación con algún extraño misterio anglicano, tal vez con la encantadora recuperación de la pintoresca figura de la canonesa. Se preguntó qué pensaría de ella la señorita Molyneux si supiese que la señorita Archer había rechazado a su hermano; y a continuación estuvo segura de que la señorita Molyneux jamás lo sabría, que lord Warburton nunca le contaba esas cosas. Le tenía cariño y se mostraba amable con ella, pero en general apenas le contaba nada. O esa, al menos, era la teoría de Isabel. Cuando, en la mesa, no estaba ocupada conversando, normalmente se entretenía en elaborar teorías sobre los otros comensales. Según Isabel, si la señorita Molyneux se enterase alguna vez de lo sucedido entre ella y lord Warburton, probablemente se quedaría anonadada porque una joven como ella desaprovechase una ocasión de ascender; o no (y esta fue la conclusión final de nuestra heroína), pensaría que la joven estadounidense tenía clara conciencia de su desigualdad.

Hiciese Isabel lo que hiciese con sus oportunidades, lo innegable era que Henrietta Stackpole no estaba en absoluto dispuesta a desperdiciar aquellas en las que ahora se veía inmersa.

—¿Sabe que es usted el primer lord que he visto en mi vida? —dijo a su vecino sin pararse en barras—. Me imagino que me supondrá terriblemente ignorante.

—Pues se ha librado de ver a unos cuantos hombres bien feos —respondió lord Warburton mientras miraba un tanto distraído alrededor de la mesa.

—¿Son muy feos? En Estados Unidos tratan de hacernos creer que todos son apuestos y magníficos y que llevan maravillosas vestimentas y coronas.

—Bah, las vestimentas y las coronas se han quedado anticuadas —dijo lord Warburton—, lo mismo que sus hachas de guerra y sus revólveres.

—Pues lo siento; creo que la aristocracia debería ser algo espléndido —declaró Henrietta—. Si no, ¿qué es entonces?

—Es que, sabe, en el mejor de los casos, es más bien poca cosa —concedió su vecino—. ¿Le apetece una patata?

—Estas patatas europeas no me agradan demasiado. Yo lo habría tomado a usted por un caballero estadounidense cualquiera.

—Pues háble me como si lo fuese —dijo lord Warburton—. Lo que no sé es cómo va a arreglárselas sin patatas; debe de encontrar muy pocas cosas que comer aquí.

Henrietta guardó silencio un momento; cabía la posibilidad de que no fuese del todo sincero.

—Apenas tengo apetito desde que he llegado —prosiguió al fin—, así que no tiene demasiada importancia. Yo a usted no lo apruebo, ¿sabe?; creo que es mi deber decírselo.

—¿No me aprueba?

—Así es; imagino que nadie le habrá dicho algo así antes, ¿a que no? No apruebo a los lores como institución. Creo que el mundo los ha dejado atrás, muy atrás.

—Ah, yo también opino igual. Tampoco yo me acepto a mí mismo. A veces me asalta el pensamiento de cómo podría desaprobarme si no fuera quien soy, ¿sabe usted? Pero, eso, por cierto, no mostrarse vano y presuntuoso, no tiene nada de malo.

—En ese caso, ¿por qué no renuncia? —inquirió la señorita Stackpole.

—¿Renunciar a…? —preguntó lord Warburton, respondiendo a aquel tono tajante de Henrietta en uno muy suave.

—A ser lord.

—¡Tengo tan poco de lord…! Lo cierto es que nos olvidaríamos por completo de la cuestión, si ustedes los dichosos estadounidenses no se pasasen la vida recordándonoslo.

—¡Me gustaría ver cómo lo hacen! —exclamó Henrietta en tono más bien sombrío.

—Yo la invitaré a la ceremonia; celebraremos una cena seguida de baile.

—Bueno. A mí me gusta ver todos los puntos de vista. No apruebo la existencia de las clases privilegiadas, pero me gusta escuchar lo que tienen que decir en su defensa.

—¡Bien poco, como puede ver!

—Me gustaría sonsacarle un poco más —continuó Henrietta—. Pero no deja usted de mirar para otro lado. Tiene miedo de mirarme a los ojos. Me doy cuenta de que quiere esquivarme.

—No, lo único que hago es buscar esas patatas desdeñadas.

—En ese caso, háble me de la situación de esa joven, de su hermana. No la entiendo. ¿Es una lady?

—Es una joven fantástica.

—No me agrada cómo lo ha dicho, es como si quisiese cambiar de tema. ¿Ocupa una posición inferior a la de usted?

—Ninguno de los dos ocupamos una posición digna de mención; pero ella sale mejor parada que yo, ya que no tiene ninguno de los quebraderos de cabeza.

—Sí, no parece que tenga muchos quebraderos de cabeza. Ya me gustaría a mí tener tan pocos como ella. Aparte de todo lo demás, lo cierto es que este país parece generar gente muy tranquila.

—Ya, es que, como ve, en general nos tomamos la vida con tranquilidad —dijo lord Warburton—. Y, además, como sabe, somos muy aburridos. Ah, cuando nos lo proponemos, a aburridos no nos gana nadie.

—Pues les recomiendo que se propongan otra cosa. Yo no sabría de qué hablar con su hermana; parece tan distinta… ¿Es esa cruz que lleva una insignia?

—¿Una insignia?

—Un símbolo de su rango.

La mirada de lord Warburton había estado vagando de un lado a otro, pero al oír aquello se cruzó con la de su interlocutora.

—Ah, sí —dijo al instante—, a las mujeres les interesan esas cosas. La cruz de plata la llevan las hijas mayores de los vizcondes.

Esta fue su inofensiva manera de vengarse por todas las veces que se habían aprovechado fácilmente de su credulidad en Estados Unidos. Al terminar de comer, le propuso a Isabel ir a la galería a ver los cuadros; y pese a saber que él había visto ya aquellos cuadros numerosas veces, ella aceptó sin criticar el pretexto. Ahora tenía la conciencia muy tranquila; desde el momento en que le había enviado la carta, se había sentido particularmente ligera de espíritu. Lord Warburton fue despacio hasta el final de la galería, examinando los cuadros en silencio; y después dijo de repente:

—Tenía la esperanza de que no me escribiese algo así.

—Era la única manera, lord Warburton —dijo la joven—. Le ruego que me crea.

—Si pudiera creerlo, está claro que la dejaría en paz. Pero no basta con querer creer para poder hacerlo; y confieso que no lo entiendo. Podría entender que no le gustase; eso lo entendería sin problemas. Pero que usted reconozca que sí que le…

—¿Qué es lo que he reconocido? —interrumpió Isabel, empalideciendo ligeramente.

—Que me considera una buena persona, ¿o no es así? —Al guardar ella silencio, continuó—: No parece que tenga usted razón alguna, y eso me produce un sentimiento de injusticia.

—Tengo una buena razón, lord Warburton —dijo en un tono que hizo que a este se le encogiera el corazón.

—Me gustaría mucho conocerla.

—Se la contaré algún día, cuando haya más hechos que la prueben.

—Pues perdóneme si le digo que mientras tanto tengo que dudar de ella.

—Me hace usted muy infeliz —dijo Isabel.

—Pues no lo lamento; tal vez le ayude a darse cuenta de cómo me siento yo. ¿Tendría la amabilidad de responderme a una pregunta? —Isabel no expresó su asentimiento con palabras, pero aparentemente él vio algo en sus ojos que lo animó a continuar—. ¿Es que prefiere usted a otra persona?

—Esa es una pregunta que preferiría no contestar.

—Ah, entonces es que sí —murmuró su pretendiente con amargura.

Aquella amargura alcanzó a Isabel, quien exclamó:

—¡Se equivoca usted! Eso no es cierto.

Dejando a un lado toda ceremonia, lord Warburton tomó asiento en un banco con aire abatido, como un hombre en dificultades; apoyó los codos en las rodillas y clavó en el suelo la mirada.

—Ni siquiera puedo alegrarme de eso —dijo al fin, reclinándose contra la pared—, porque esa sí que sería una excusa.

Isabel enarcó las cejas, sorprendida.

—¿Una excusa? ¿Es que tengo necesidad de excusarme?

Él, sin embargo, no respondió a la pregunta. Una nueva idea le rondaba la cabeza.

—¿Es por mis ideas políticas? ¿Cree que voy demasiado lejos?

—No puedo poner objeción alguna a sus ideas políticas, puesto que no las entiendo.

—¡Le trae sin cuidado lo que yo crea! —exclamó él, poniéndose en pie—. A usted todo le da igual.

Isabel se alejó hasta el otro extremo de la galería y se quedó allí, mostrándole su preciosa espalda, su figura grácil y estilizada, la esbeltez de su blanco cuello y el espesor de sus oscuras trenzas. Se detuvo frente a un pequeño cuadro como si tuviese la intención de examinarlo; y había algo tan joven y libre en sus movimientos que hasta la agilidad que denotaban le pareció a él una especie burla. Los ojos de Isabel, sin embargo, no veían nada; se habían inundado repentinamente de lágrimas. Al poco, él se le acercó, y para entonces la joven ya se había secado las lágrimas; pero cuando se volvió, el rostro estaba pálido y tenía una extraña expresión en la mirada.

—Esa razón que no quería darle… voy a contársela después de todo. Se trata de que no puedo escapar a mi destino.

—¿A su destino?

—Casarme con usted sería tratar de escapar.

—No lo entiendo. ¿Por qué no habría de ser ese su destino como cualquier otro?

—Porque no lo es —dijo Isabel con aire muy femenino—. Sé que no lo es. Mi destino no es renunciar… sé que no puede serlo.

El pobre lord Warburton se quedó mirándola, un signo de interrogación en cada ojo.

—¿Me está diciendo que casarse conmigo sería una renuncia?

—No en el sentido habitual. Ganaría… ganaría… ganaría mucho. Pero supone renunciar a otras oportunidades.

—¿A otras oportunidades de qué?

—No me refiero a oportunidades de casarme —dijo Isabel, que estaba recuperando rápidamente el color.

Y a continuación se interrumpió y bajó la mirada con el ceño fruncido, como si fuese inútil tratar de aclarar lo que quería decir.

—No creo que sea una presunción por mi parte si afirmo que ganará usted más de lo que va a perder —observó su acompañante.

—No puedo escapar a la infelicidad. Si me casase con usted, estaría intentando hacerlo.

—No sé si lo estaría intentando, pero lo cierto es que lo lograría: ¡eso tengo que reconocerlo! —exclamó con una carcajada nerviosa.

—¡No debo… no puedo! —exclamó la joven.

—Muy bien, si se empeña en ser desgraciada, no veo por qué también tendría que hacerme desgraciado a mí. Si para usted una vida desgraciada está llena de atractivos, para mí no tiene ninguno.

—Yo no me empeño en tener una vida desgraciada —dijo Isabel—. Siempre he estado resuelta a ser feliz, y con frecuencia he creído que lo sería. Se lo he dicho a la gente, puede usted preguntarles. Pero de vez en cuando me asalta el pensamiento de que jamás alcanzaré la felicidad por medios extraordinarios, huyendo, apartándome.

—¿Apartándose de qué?

—De la vida. De las oportunidades y de los riesgos habituales, de aquello que la mayoría de la gente experimenta y sufre.

Lord Warburton esbozó una sonrisa que casi denotaba esperanza.

—Está bien, mi querida señorita Archer —empezó a explicar con respetuosa impaciencia—, yo no le ofrezco exonerarla de la vida ni de ninguna oportunidad o riesgo de ninguna clase. ¡Ojalá pudiese! ¡Tenga por seguro que lo haría! ¿Por quién me toma usted? ¡Dios sabe que yo no soy el emperador de la China! Todo lo que puedo ofrecerle es la oportunidad de enfrentarse a los sinsabores comunes de la vida de manera cómoda. ¿Los sinsabores de la vida? ¡Pero si yo soy un devoto de los sinsabores de la vida! Alíese conmigo y le prometo que los tendrá en abundancia. No se apartará usted de nada en absoluto, ni siquiera de su amiga la señorita Stackpole.

—Ella jamás lo aprobaría —dijo Isabel, tratando de sonreír y de aprovechar aquella cuestión secundaria, despreciándose a sí misma, y no poco, por hacerlo.

—¿Estamos hablando de la señorita Stackpole? —preguntó impaciente el caballero—. Yo jamás había conocido a una persona que juzgase las cosas desde unos supuestos tan teóricos.

—Imagino que ahora se está refiriendo a mí —dijo Isabel con humildad; y se dio la vuelta de nuevo, al ver que la señorita Molyneux entraba en la galería, acompañada de Henrietta y de Ralph.

La hermana de lord Warburton se dirigió a este con cierta timidez y le recordó que ella tenía que estar de vuelta en casa antes de la hora del té, ya que estaba esperando invitados. Lord Warburton no respondió, daba la impresión de no haberla oído; tenía otras cosas en la mente, y con razón. La señorita Molyneux, como si su hermano perteneciese a la realeza, adoptó la actitud de una dama de honor.

—¡No lo puedo creer, señorita Molyneux! —exclamó Henrietta Stackpole—. Si yo quisiese irme, él tendría que hacerlo. Si quisiese que mi hermano hiciese algo, no le quedaría otro remedio que hacerlo.

—¡Ah! Warburton hace todo lo que se le pide —respondió la señorita Molyneux con una risilla tímida—. ¡Cuántos cuadros tiene usted! —añadió, volviéndose hacia Ralph.

—Parecen muchos, porque están colocados todos juntos —dijo Ralph—. Pero en realidad no es la mejor forma.

—Pues a mí me parece muy bonito. Ojala tuviésemos una galería en Lockleigh. A mí me encantan los cuadros —insistió la señorita Molyneux, dirigiéndose a Ralph, como si tuviese miedo de que la señorita Stackpole la abordase de nuevo. Daba la impresión de que Henrietta la fascinase y asustase a la vez.

—Sí, está muy bien tener cuadros —dijo Ralph, quien parecía saber mejor cuál era el tipo de reflexión más adecuado para ella.

—Resultan tan agradables cuando llueve —continuó la joven dama—. Y ha llovido tanto últimamente.

—Siento que se vaya, lord Warburton —dijo Henrietta—. Me gustaría haberle sonsacado muchas más cosas.

—Yo no me voy —respondió lord Warburton.

—Su hermana dice que debe hacerlo. En Estados Unidos los caballeros obedecen a las damas.

—Me temo que tenemos invitados a tomar el té —dijo la señorita Molyneux mirando a su hermano.

—Está bien, querida, nos vamos.

—Tenía la esperanza de que opusiese resistencia —dijo Henrietta—. Quería ver qué hacía la señorita Molyneux.

—Yo nunca hago nada —declaró la joven dama en cuestión.

—Imagino que en una posición como la suya tiene suficiente con existir —replicó la señorita Stackpole—. Me gustaría muchísimo verla a usted en su casa.

—Tiene que venir otra vez a Lockleigh —dijo la señorita Molyneux con mucha dulzura dirigiéndose a Isabel y haciendo caso omiso del comentario de la amiga de esta.

Isabel la miró a los tranquilos ojos un momento, y durante ese tiempo pareció distinguir en la profundidad de

aquellas pupilas grises el reflejo de todo lo que había rechazado al rechazar a lord Warburton: la paz, la bondad, el honor, las posesiones, una profunda seguridad y una gran exclusión. Besó a la señorita Molyneux, y a continuación dijo:

—Me temo que ya no voy a volver nunca.

—¿Nunca?

—Me temo que me marcho.

—Ah, lo siento muchísimo —dijo la señorita Molyneux—. Creo que eso está muy mal de su parte.

Lord Warburton contempló aquella breve escena; después se dio la vuelta y clavó la mirada en uno de los cuadros. Ralph, que estaba apoyado en el riel de delante del cuadro con las manos en los bolsillos, había estado observándolo.

—A mí me gustaría ir a verlo a su casa —dijo Henrietta, a quien lord Warburton descubrió a su lado—. Me gustaría tener una hora de conversación con usted; hay muchas preguntas que desearía hacerle.

—Estaré encantado de recibirla —respondió el propietario de Lockleigh—; pero estoy seguro de que no podré contestar a muchas de sus preguntas. ¿Cuándo vendrá usted?

—Cuando la señorita Archer quiera llevarme. Estamos pensando en ir a Londres, pero iremos antes a verle. Estoy empeñada en que usted satisfaga mi curiosidad.

—Si depende de la señorita Archer, mucho me temo que no conseguirá gran cosa. Ella no quiere venir a Lockleigh; no le agrada el lugar.

—¡Si me dijo que era precioso! —repuso Henrietta.

Lord Warburton titubeó.

—Pese a todo, no quiere venir. Será mejor que venga usted sola —añadió.

Henrietta se irguió y abrió desmesuradamente sus grandes ojos.

—¿Le diría usted eso a una dama inglesa? —preguntó con cierta aspereza.

Lord Warburton no apartó la mirada.

—Sí, si me gustase lo suficiente.

—Ya se cuidaría de que no le gustase lo bastante. Si la señorita Archer no quiere ir de nuevo de visita a su casa es porque no quiere llevarme. Sé lo que piensa de mí, e imagino que usted piensa lo mismo: que no debería sacar a relucir a personas concretas. —Lord Warburton se sintió desconcertado; no estaba al tanto de la faceta profesional de la señorita Stackpole y no captó la alusión—. La señorita Archer lo ha puesto sobre aviso —continuó ella.

—¿Me ha puesto sobre aviso?

—¿No ha sido acaso la razón por la que ha venido aquí sola con usted, para ponerlo en guardia?

—No, claro que no —dijo lord Warburton con desenvoltura—; nuestra conversación no versó sobre algo tan solemne.

—Está bien, pero usted sí ha estado en guardia, y mucho. Supongo que debe de ser algo natural en usted; eso es precisamente lo que yo quería comprobar. Y lo mismo ocurre con la señorita Molyneux: no se compromete a nada. De todas formas, ya está usted advertida —continuó Henrietta, dirigiéndose a la joven dama en cuestión—; pero en su caso no era necesario.

—Eso espero —dijo la señorita Molyneux con vaguedad.

—La señorita Stackpole toma notas —explicó Ralph en tono conciliador—. Es una gran satírica; ve a través de todos nosotros y después nos expone.

—Bueno, tengo que decir que en mi vida he tenido una colección de material tan malo —declaró Henrietta, paseando la mirada de Isabel a lord Warburton y de este noble a su hermana y a Ralph—. Parece que a todos les haya pasado algo; están igual de alicaídos que si hubiesen recibido un telegrama con malas noticias.

—Está claro que ve a través de nosotros, señorita Stackpole —dijo Ralph en voz baja, al tiempo que le hacía un pequeño gesto de complicidad mientras conducía al grupo fuera de la galería—. A todos nos pasa algo.

Isabel iba detrás de Ralph y Henrietta; la señorita Molyneux, quien era obvio que sentía una inmensa simpatía hacia ella, la había tomado del brazo para caminar a su lado por aquel piso tan encerado. Lord Warburton iba al otro lado con las manos a la espalda y la mirada baja. Durante unos momentos no dijo nada, para después preguntar:

—¿Es cierto que se va usted a Londres?

—Creo que ya está todo dispuesto.

—¿Y cuándo volverá?

—Dentro de unos días, pero probablemente sea solo por poco tiempo. Me marcho a París con mi tía.

—Entonces, ¿volveré a verla?

—No en una buena temporada —dijo Isabel—. Pero espero que volvamos a vernos algún día.

—¿De verdad lo espera?

—Mucho.

Lord Warburton dio unos cuantos pasos en silencio; a continuación se detuvo y le ofreció la mano.

—Adiós.

—Adiós —dijo Isabel.

La señorita Molyneux la besó de nuevo, y ella esperó a que ambos se fuesen. Después, sin reunirse de nuevo con Henrietta y Ralph, se retiró a sus aposentos, donde, antes de la cena, la encontró la señora Touchett, que se había detenido de camino al salón.

—Debo decirte —dijo la dama— que tu tío me ha informado de tus relaciones con lord Warburton.

Isabel se quedó pensativa.

—¿Relaciones? Apenas se las puede llamar relaciones. Eso es la parte más extraña del asunto: no me ha visto más que en tres o cuatro ocasiones.

—¿Por qué se lo contaste a tu tío en vez de decírmelo a mí? —preguntó la señora Touchett con tono indiferente.

La joven titubeó de nuevo.

—Porque él conoce mejor a lord Warburton.

—Sí, pero yo te conozco mejor a ti.

—No estoy segura de eso —dijo Isabel sonriendo.

—Yo tampoco, después de todo; especialmente cuando me miras con ese aire de suficiencia. Cualquiera diría que estás tremendamente satisfecha de ti misma y que te has llevado un premio. Imagino que si has rechazado una oferta como la de lord Warburton es porque esperas que te hagan una mejor.

—¡Seguro que mi tío no ha dicho eso! —exclamó Isabel sin perder la sonrisa.

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Se había acordado que las dos jóvenes fuesen a Londres bajo la supervisión de Ralph, aunque a la señora Touchett el plan le agradaba bien poco. Era exactamente la clase de plan, dijo, que se le ocurriría sugerir a la señorita Stackpole, y preguntó si la corresponsal del *Interviewer* iba a llevar al grupo a alojarse a su casa de huéspedes preferida.

—A mí me trae sin cuidado dónde nos lleve a alojarnos, con tal de que haya color local —dijo Isabel—. Para eso es para lo que vamos a Londres.

—Supongo que cuando una joven ha rechazado a un lord inglés, puede hacer cualquier cosa —replicó su tía—. Después de eso, para qué va a andarse con chiquitas.

—¿Le habría gustado que me casase con lord Warburton? —preguntó Isabel.

—Por supuesto que sí.

—Yo creía que usted detestaba a los ingleses.

—Y así es; razón de más para utilizarlos.

—¿Es esa su idea del matrimonio?

E Isabel se aventuró a añadir que no parecía que su tía hubiese utilizado mucho al señor Touchett.

—Tu tío no es un noble inglés —dijo la señora Touchett—, aunque de haberlo sido, lo más probable es que me hubiese instalado igual en Florencia.

—¿Cree que lord Warburton me habría hecho mejor de lo que soy? —preguntó la joven con cierta exaltación—. No quiero decir que me considere demasiado buena para no poder mejorar. Lo que quiero decir es… es que no amo a lord Warburton lo suficiente como para casarme con él.

—En ese caso, has hecho bien en rechazarlo —dijo la señora Touchett con su tono de voz más suave y sobrio—. Solo espero que cuando te hagan la próxima propuesta importante, consigas estar a la altura.

—Será mejor que esperemos a que llegue esa propuesta antes de hablar de ella. Lo que de verdad espero es que no me hagan más ofertas por el momento. Me trastornan por completo.

—Lo más probable es que no te importunen con ellas si adoptas de forma permanente el modo de vida bohemio. Pero bueno, le he prometido a Ralph que no criticaría.

—Yo haré lo que él diga que es correcto. Tengo una confianza sin límites en Ralph.

—¡Su madre te está enormemente agradecida! —dijo la dama en cuestión con una risa seca.

—¡Y a mí me parece que tiene motivos para estarlo! —respondió Isabel sin reprimirse.

Ralph le había asegurado que no contravenía las normas de la decencia que fuesen los tres, en pequeño grupo, a visitar los monumentos de la metrópoli; pero su madre era de distinta opinión. Al igual que muchas damas de su país que llevaban largo tiempo viviendo en Europa, la señora Touchett había perdido su tacto original para tales cuestiones, y en su reacción, que no era en sí deplorable, en contra de la libertad que se permitía a los jóvenes al otro lado del océano, se había dejado arrastrar por escrúpulos gratuitos y exagerados. Ralph acompañó a sus visitantes a la ciudad y las instaló en un tranquilo hotel en una calle que hacía esquina con Piccadilly. En un principio había pensado en llevarlas a la casa que su padre tenía en Winchester Square, una mansión enorme y anodina que en esa época del año se halla envuelta en el silencio y en fundas de holanda; pero cayó en la cuenta de que al estar el cocinero en Gardencourt, no había nadie en la casa para prepararles las comidas, y, en consecuencia, el hotel Pratt se convirtió en su lugar de descanso. Ralph, por su parte, se instaló en Winchester Square, ya que contaba allí con una «guarida» a la que tenía mucho aprecio y estaba acostumbrado a miedos mucho mayores que una cocina apagada. Lo cierto es que se proponía utilizar en lo posible los servicios del hotel Pratt y empezó el día con una visita temprana a sus compañeras de viaje, a quienes el señor Pratt en persona, con un enorme chaleco blanco a punto de estallar, se encargaba de servir los platos del desayuno. Ralph se presentó, como él dijo, después de desayunar, y el pequeño grupo decidió el plan de actividades para el día. Como Londres luce en el mes de septiembre un semblante sin mácula a no ser por las huellas del tráfago anterior, el joven, que en ocasiones utilizó un tono de disculpa, se vio obligado a recordarle a su acompañante que no había un alma en la ciudad, despertando el sarcasmo de la señorita Stackpole.

—Supongo que lo que quiere decir es que la aristocracia se encuentra ausente —respondió Henrietta—; pero no

creo que haya prueba mejor de que si desapareciesen por completo no se los echaría de menos. A mí me parece que la ciudad está todo lo llena que puede estar. Aquí no hay nadie, aparte de unos tres o cuatro millones de personas. ¿Cómo los llama usted… la clase media baja? No son más que los habitantes de Londres, y no cuentan para nada.

Ralph declaró que para él la aristocracia no dejaba ningún vacío que la señorita Stackpole no llenase, y que en aquel momento era imposible hallar un hombre más satisfecho que él. Sus palabras no decían más que la verdad, ya que aquellos mustios días de septiembre, en aquella inmensa ciudad medio vacía, estaban envueltos en encanto, de la misma forma que una gema de colores podría estar envuelta en un paño polvoriento. Cuando regresó por la noche a la casa vacía de Winchester Square, tras varias horas seguidas en compañía de sus amigas, mucho más entusiasmadas en comparación, recorrió el enorme comedor en penumbra, iluminado solo por la vela que había cogido de la mesa del vestíbulo al entrar. La plaza estaba en silencio, la casa también; cuando alzó uno de los maineles del comedor para que entrase aire, oyó el lento rechinar de las botas de un policía solitario. Sus propios pasos resonaban con fuerza en la estancia vacía; habían retirado algunas alfombras, y allá donde pisase se despertaba un eco melancólico. Tomó asiento en una de las butacas; la enorme y oscura mesa del comedor lanzaba destellos aquí y allá a la luz de la pequeña vela; los cuadros de la pared, todos ellos ensombrecidos, parecían vagos e incoherentes. Se diría que flotaba el espectro de cenas tiempo atrás digeridas, de charlas de sobremesa que habían perdido actualidad. Tal vez aquella presencia de lo sobrenatural tuviese algo que ver con el hecho de que había dado rienda suelta a su imaginación y de que permaneciese en su asiento hasta mucho después de la hora en que habría debido de estar en la cama, sin hacer nada, sin tan siquiera leer el periódico vespertino. Digo que no hacía nada, y mantengo dicha afirmación en vista del hecho de que en aquellos momentos pensaba en Isabel. Pensar en Isabel no podía ser otra cosa para él que una ocupación indolente, que no llevaba a nada y de la que nadie obtenía provecho. Su prima nunca le había parecido tan encantadora como en aquellos días empleados, como corresponde a un turista, en explorar las profundidades y la superficie del entorno metropolitano. Isabel estaba llena de teorías, de conclusiones, de emociones; si había venido en busca de color local, lo encontró por todas partes. Hacía más preguntas de las que él podía responder, y aventuraba arriesgadas teorías en relación con las causas históricas y las consecuencias sociales que él se sentía asimismo incapaz de aceptar o refutar. El grupo fue en más de una ocasión al Museo Británico y a aquel otro palacio del arte más luminoso que dedica al arte antiguo una parte tan importante de una monótona zona residencial; pasaron una mañana en la Abadía y fueron hasta la Torre en uno de los vapores de línea; contemplaron cuadros tanto de colecciones públicas como privadas, y en distintas ocasiones se sentaron bajo los frondosos árboles de Kensington Gardens. Henrietta demostró ser una turista incansable y una juez más benévola de lo que Ralph se habría aventurado a esperar. Es cierto que sufrió muchas decepciones, y que Londres en general salió perdiendo al compararla con sus vívidos recuerdos de los puntos fuertes de la mentalidad cívica de Estados Unidos; pero sacó el máximo de su inferior categoría y se limitó a exhalar un suspiro de vez en cuando y a exclamar un «¡Vaya!» desganado que no iba más allá y se esfumaba rápidamente. «No siento gran simpatía por los objetos inanimados», le comentó a Isabel en la National Gallery; y continuó sufriendo por la pobre percepción de la vida del país desde dentro que hasta el momento le había sido otorgada. Los paisajes de Turner y los toros asirios no eran sino un pobre sustituto de las cenas literarias en las que había esperado conocer a los genios y personas de renombre de Gran Bretaña.

—¿Dónde están sus hombres públicos? ¿Dónde están sus hombres y mujeres con intelecto? —le preguntó a Ralph, plantada en mitad de Trafalgar Square como si pensase que aquel era un lugar donde lo normal sería encontrarse a unos cuantos—. ¿Dice usted que ese que está en lo alto de la columna es uno de ellos… lord Nelson? ¿Era también lord? ¿Es que no era lo suficiente grande que tuvieron que colocarlo a cien pies del suelo? Eso pertenece el pasado; a mí el pasado no me interesa; quiero ver algunas mentes preclaras del presente. No diré del futuro, porque no creo mucho en el futuro de ustedes.

El pobre Ralph no contaba con muchas mentes preclaras entre sus amistades y rara vez disfrutaba del placer de someter a preguntas a una celebridad; situación esta que para la señorita Stackpole indicaba una deplorable falta de iniciativa.

—Si estuviera en mi país —dijo—, lo que haría sería ponerme en contacto con el caballero, quienquiera que fuese, para decirle que había oído hablar mucho de él y que había venido a comprobarlo por mí misma. Pero, por lo que usted dice, deduzco que aquí no tienen esa costumbre. Da la impresión de que tengan ustedes un montón de costumbres sin sentido, pero ninguna que resulte de utilidad. Es indudable que nosotros somos más avanzados. Supongo que tendré que olvidarme por completo del aspecto social.

Y Henrietta, pese a que siempre llevaba consigo una guía y una pluma y escribió una crónica para el *Interviewer* sobre la Torre (en la que describía la ejecución de lady Jane Grey), tuvo la penosa sensación de estar fracasando en su misión.

El incidente que había precedido a la partida de Isabel de Gardencourt dejó una huella dolorosa en la mente de nuestra joven: cada vez que sentía de nuevo en el rostro, como un oleaje insistente, el frío hálito de la sorpresa de su último pretendiente, no podía hacer otra cosa que protegerse la cabeza hasta que el aire se despejaba. No podía haber hecho otra cosa; eso era innegable. Pero, de todas maneras, aquella necesidad había resultado tan falta de gracia como cualquier movimiento físico que se realiza en una posición forzada, y no tenía deseo alguno de apuntarse ningún tanto por su conducta. Mezclado con ese orgullo imperfecto, sin embargo, había una sensación de libertad que era agradable en sí misma y que, mientras recorría la gran ciudad con aquellos acompañantes tan dispares, exteriorizaba ocasionalmente en extrañas demostraciones. Cuando paseaba por Kensington Gardens se detenía a hablar con los chiquillos, sobre todo con los más pobres, que veía jugando en la hierba; les preguntaba sus nombres y les daba una moneda de seis peniques y, cuando eran guapos, los besaba. Ralph se daba cuenta de aquellas muestras trasnochadas de caridad; no se le escapaba nada de lo que ella hacía. Una tarde, para que sus compañeras tuviesen algo en que pasar el tiempo, las invitó a tomar el té en Winchester Square, e hizo arreglar la casa en la medida de lo posible para la visita. Había otro invitado para recibirlas, un soltero afable, viejo amigo de Ralph, que casualmente se encontraba en la ciudad y para quien establecer un rápido trato con la señorita Stackpole no pareció suponer ninguna dificultad ni causarle ningún miedo. El señor Bantling, hombre fornido, elegante y sonriente de cuarenta años, admirablemente vestido, muy bien informado y al que todo divertía, se rió a mandíbula batiente con todo lo que dijo Henrietta, le sirvió varias tazas de té y examinó en su compañía la considerable colección de curiosidades de Ralph, y después, cuando el anfitrión propuso que saliesen a la plaza para simular que estaban en una *fête-champêtre*, dio varias vueltas con ella por el cerrado recinto y, en muchos momentos de su conversación, respondió con animación, como si sintiese un enorme interés por el asunto discutido, a las reflexiones de ella sobre la vida del país desde dentro.

—Ah, ya veo; me atrevería a decir que Gardencourt le resultó demasiado tranquilo. Es natural que allí no pasen muchas cosas con tanta enfermedad en el ambiente. Touchett está muy mal, sabe; los médicos le han prohibido tajantemente residir en Inglaterra, y solo ha vuelto para cuidar de su padre. El anciano, según creo, tiene por lo menos media docena de achaques. Hablan de gota, pero sé de buena fuente que tiene una enfermedad orgánica tan avanzada que puede estar segura de que va a morirse de repente un día de estos. Y claro, ese tipo de cosas hacen que una casa resulte bastante aburrida; me sorprende que tengan invitados cuando pueden hacer tan poco por ellos. Además, creo que el señor Touchett está siempre discutiendo con su mujer; ella vive separada del marido, sabe, una de esas cosas curiosas tan propias de ustedes los estadounidenses. Si lo que usted quiere es una casa donde siempre están pasando cosas, le recomiendo que vaya a pasar unos días con mi hermana, lady Pensil, en Bedfordshire. Le escribiré mañana y estoy seguro de que estará encantada de invitarla. Sé exactamente lo que usted quiere: quiere una casa en la que se organicen representaciones de teatro, picnics y esas cosas. Mi hermana es de ese tipo de mujeres; se pasa la vida organizando una cosa u otra y siempre se alegra de contar con gente que le eche una mano. Estoy seguro de que la invitará a vuelta de correo: le gustan a rabiar los escritores y la gente distinguida. Ella también escribe, sabe usted; pero yo no he leído todo lo que ha escrito. Normalmente se trata de poesía, y a mí la poesía no me atrae mucho… a no ser la de Byron. Supongo que en Estados Unidos tendrán ustedes una gran opinión de Byron —prosiguió el señor Bantling, creciéndose ante el estímulo que suponía la atención de la señorita Stackpole, añadiendo detalles en rápida sucesión y cambiando de tema con facilidad. Y, con todo, con la habilidad necesaria para no perder de vista la idea, deslumbrante para Henrietta, de ir a visitar a lady Pensil en Bedfordshire—. Comprendo lo que usted quiere: quiere ver algo que sea genuinamente inglés. Los Touchett no tienen nada de ingleses, sabe usted; tienen sus propias costumbres, su propio idioma, su propia comida, creo que hasta una religión rara y propia. Según me cuentan, el anciano piensa que es malo cazar. Tiene que llegar usted a casa de mi hermana a tiempo para la representación teatral, y estoy seguro de que estará encantada de darle un papel. No tengo duda de que usted será buena actuando; sé que es muy inteligente. Mi hermana tiene cuarenta años y siete hijos, pero va a hacer el papel principal. A pesar de no ser ninguna belleza, he de reconocer que sabe sacarse mucho partido con el maquillaje. Por supuesto, si usted no quiere, no tiene por qué actuar.

De esa manera se expresaba el señor Bantling mientras caminaban por la hierba de Winchester Square, que, pese a estar salpicada por el hollín de Londres, invitaba a demorarse en el paseo. A Henrietta aquel soltero elocuente, de voz

agradable, con su capacidad de dejarse impresionar ante los méritos femeninos y su espléndido abanico de ideas, le pareció un hombre realmente grato y apreció la oportunidad que le ofrecía.

—Desde luego que iría si su hermana me invitase. Creo que sería mi deber. ¿Cómo dice que se apellida?

—Pensil. Es un apellido extraño, pero no es malo.

—Para mí un apellido es tan bueno como cualquier otro. ¿Y cuál es su rango?

—Ah, es la esposa de un barón; un rango cómodo. Bastante distinguido, pero sin ser exagerado.

—No sé si a mí no me resultará demasiado distinguida. ¿Cómo dice que se llama el lugar donde vive… Bedfordshire?

—Vive apartada en el norte de ese condado. Es una zona sin mucho encanto, pero me atrevo a decir que a usted no le importará. Yo intentaré acercarme cuando usted esté allí.

Todo esto fue muy del agrado de la señorita Stackpole, y sintió tener que separarse del atento hermano de lady Pensil, pero, el día anterior, de forma casual, se había encontrado en Piccadilly con unas amigas a las que hacía un año que no veía: las señoritas Climber, dos damas de Wilmington, Delaware, que habían estado recorriendo el continente y estaban ahora preparándose para embarcar de vuelta. Henrietta había mantenido una larga conversación con ellas en la acera de Piccadilly y, pese a que las tres damas no dejaron de hablar a un tiempo, no habían agotado el repertorio. Así que habían acordado que Henrietta iría a cenar con ellas en su alojamiento de Jermyn Street el día siguiente a las seis, y en ese momento se recordó a sí misma dicho compromiso. Se dispuso a salir en dirección a Jermyn Street, y se despidió en primer lugar de Ralph Touchett e Isabel, que estaban sentados en unas sillas de jardín en otra parte del recinto, ocupados, si es que se puede decir tal cosa, en intercambiar frases agradables, mucho menos interesantes que el coloquio tan práctico entre la señorita Stackpole y el señor Bantling. Tras acordar que Isabel y su amiga se reunirían a una hora respetable en el hotel Pratt, Ralph indicó que la señorita Stackpole necesitaba un coche. No podía ir a pie hasta Jermyn Street.

—Imagino que lo que quiere usted decir es que no es apropiado que camine sola —soltó Henrietta—. ¡Santo cielo! ¿Cómo he llegado a esto?

—No hay ninguna necesidad de que vaya sola —intervino el señor Bantling alegremente—. Yo estaría encantado de acompañarla.

—Lo único que yo quería decir es que llegará usted tarde a cenar —explicó Ralph—. Y esas pobres damas pueden pensar que, en el último momento, nos negamos a dejarla marchar.

—Lo mejor será que tomes un coche, Henrietta —apuntó Isabel.

—Yo le conseguiré uno si confía en mí —añadió el señor Bantling—. Puede que tengamos que caminar un poco antes de encontrar uno.

—No veo por qué no iba a confiar en él, ¿tú qué crees? —preguntó Henrietta a Isabel.

—No sé qué podría hacerte el señor Bantling —respondió Isabel complaciente—; pero, si quieres, iremos contigo hasta encontrar un coche.

—No te preocupes; iremos solos. Vamos, señor Bantling, y asegúrese de conseguirme uno bueno.

El señor Bantling prometió hacer todo lo que estuviese en su mano y los dos se alejaron, dejando a la joven y a su primo solos en la plaza, sobre la que ahora empezaba a extenderse el suave crepúsculo de septiembre. Reinaba una calma absoluta; en el amplio cuadrado de casas en penumbra no se veía luz en ninguna ventana, con las celosías y los postigos echados; las aceras estaban completamente despejadas y, dejando a un lado a dos chicuelos de un arrabal cercano, que, atraídos por los signos de una animación inusitada en el interior de la plaza, asomaban los rostros entre los barrotes oxidados de la verja, el objeto más vívido que había a la vista era el gran buzón de correos rojo de la esquina sudeste.

—Henrietta le pedirá que suba al coche y la acompañe a Jermyn Street —observó Ralph, quien siempre que hablaba de la señorita Stackpole se refería a ella como Henrietta.

—Es muy posible —dijo su acompañante.

—O mejor, no, no lo hará —prosiguió Ralph—, será Bantling quien le pida permiso para subir.

—También es muy posible. Me alegra mucho que hayan congeniado tanto.

—Ella ha hecho una conquista. Bantling la considera una mujer brillante. Esto podría llegar lejos —dijo Ralph.

—Yo considero a Henrietta una mujer brillante, pero no creo que esto llegue muy lejos. Nunca alcanzarían a conocerse de veras. Bantling no tiene ni la más remota idea de cómo es ella en realidad, ni Henrietta, por su parte, una apropiada comprensión de cómo es Bantling.

—La base más frecuente de una unión suele ser el desconocimiento mutuo. Pero tampoco es que resulte muy difícil entender a Bob Bantling —añadió Ralph—. Es un ser muy simple.

—Sí, pero Henrietta lo es aún más. Y, dime, ¿qué hago yo ahora? —preguntó Isabel, mirando a su alrededor a la luz mortecina del atardecer, que hacía que el limitado paisaje ajardinado de la plaza pareciese amplio y rotundo—. No creo que vayas a proponerme que tú y yo nos subamos también a un coche y demos una vuelta por Londres para entretenernos.

—No hay razón para que no nos quedemos aquí si a ti no te desagrada. Hace una temperatura muy buena y todavía queda una media hora hasta que oscurezca; y, si me lo permites, voy a encender un cigarrillo.

—Puedes hacer lo que quieras —dijo Isabel—, siempre que me tengas entretenida hasta las siete y media. A esa hora me propongo regresar y disfrutar de un ligero refrigerio a solas en el hotel Pratt: un par de huevos pasados por agua y un panecillo.

—¿Me permites que cene contigo? —preguntó Ralph.

—No, tú cenarás en tu club.

Se habían dirigido de nuevo a las sillas en el centro de la plaza, y Ralph había encendido su cigarrillo. Le habría proporcionado un placer inmenso estar presente en aquel sencillo festín que Isabel acababa de describir; pero, en su defecto, le gustaba incluso que se lo prohibiese. Por el momento, sin embargo, disfrutaba inmensamente de estar a solas con ella, en aquella penumbra cada vez más densa, en medio de la populosa ciudad; hacía que pareciese que Isabel dependía de él y que estaba en su poder. Un poder que él solo podía ejercer de la forma más difusa; la mejor manera de hacerlo era acatar las decisiones de ella con sumisión, en lo cual había sin duda cierta emoción.

—¿Por qué no me permites que cene contigo? —quiso saber tras una pausa.

—Porque no me apetece.

—Supongo que te has cansado de mí.

—Dentro de una hora lo habré hecho. Es que tengo el don de la profecía.

—Pues mientras tanto seré encantador —dijo Ralph.

Pero no añadió nada más, y como ella no le replicó, estuvieron un rato sentados en medio de una quietud que parecía contradecir su promesa de entretenimiento. Le pareció que Isabel tenía la mente ocupada, y se preguntó en qué estaría pensando; había dos o tres asuntos muy posibles. Por fin, habló de nuevo:

—¿Tus objeciones a que te acompañe esta noche obedecen a que esperas a otro visitante?

Isabel volvió la cabeza y lo miró con sus ojos claros y serenos.

—¿Otro visitante? ¿Qué otro visitante podría tener?

A Ralph no se le ocurrió ningún nombre, lo que hizo que su pregunta le pareciese tan estúpida como brutal.

—Tienes muchas amistades que yo no conozco. Cuentas con todo un pasado del que yo he sido perversamente excluido.

—Es que tú estabas reservado para mi futuro. No debes olvidar que mi pasado está allá, al otro lado del mar. Aquí en Londres no hay rastro de él.

—Muy bien. En ese caso, tienes el futuro sentado a tu lado. Es estupendo tener el futuro tan a mano. —Y Ralph encendió un nuevo cigarrillo y se hizo la reflexión de que Isabel probablemente decía aquello porque se había enterado de que el señor Caspar Goodwood se había marchado a París. Tras encender el cigarrillo, dio unas cuantas caladas y a continuación prosiguió—: Te acabo de prometer que iba a ser muy divertido; pero, como ves, no estoy a la altura de mi promesa, y lo cierto es que resulta de lo más temerario por mi parte comprometerse a entretener a una persona como tú. ¿Cómo van a interesarte mis pobres esfuerzos? Tú tienes ideas muy elevadas… grandes expectativas al respecto. Como mínimo, tendría que traer una banda de música o una compañía de saltimbanquis.

—Con un saltimbanqui basta, y tú lo haces muy bien. Vamos, continúa, y dentro de otros diez minutos empezaré a reírme.

—Te aseguro que estoy hablando muy en serio —dijo Ralph—. De verdad que tú pides mucho.

—No sé de qué me hablas. ¡Yo no pido nada!

—No aceptas nada —dijo Ralph. Isabel se ruborizó, y en ese momento, de improviso, creyó entender lo que Ralph quería decir. Pero ¿por qué tenía que hablarle de semejantes cosas? Su primo titubeó un instante y después continuó —: Hay algo que me gustaría mucho decirte. Es una pregunta que quiero plantearte. A mí me parece que tengo derecho a hacértela, porque tengo cierto interés en la respuesta.

—Pregunta lo que quieras —respondió Isabel con dulzura—, y trataré de complacerte.

—Muy bien, en tal caso, espero que no te molestes si te digo que Warburton me ha contado parte de lo sucedido entre vosotros.

Isabel reprimió un gesto de sorpresa y fijó la mirada en el abanico, que tenía abierto.

—Muy bien; supongo que era natural que te lo contase.

—Tengo su permiso para decirte que lo ha hecho. Él todavía alberga alguna esperanza —dijo Ralph.

—¿Todavía?

—Hace unos días lo hacía.

—No creo que ahora le quede ninguna —dijo la joven.

—Si es así, lo siento mucho; es un hombre muy honesto.

—Dime una cosa: ¿te ha pedido él que hables conmigo?

—No, no se trata de eso. Si me lo contó, fue porque no podía evitarlo. Somos viejos amigos, y él se sentía muy decepcionado. Me mandó una nota pidiéndome que fuese a verlo, y fui en coche a Lockleigh el día antes de que él y su hermana almorzaran con nosotros. Estaba muy abatido; acababa de recibir una carta tuya.

—¿Te mostró la carta? —preguntó Isabel con momentáneo aire de desdén.

—Por supuesto que no. Pero me dijo que era una negativa categórica. Lo sentí mucho por él —repitió Ralph.

Durante unos momentos, Isabel no dijo nada; después habló al fin:

—¿Sabes en cuántas ocasiones me ha visto? —preguntó—. Unas cinco o seis veces.

—Eso dice mucho a tu favor.

—Yo no lo digo por eso.

—¿Por qué lo dices entonces? No será para demostrar que el pobre Warburton es alguien superficial, porque estoy completamente seguro de que no crees semejante cosa.

Isabel era ciertamente incapaz de decir que era eso lo que pensaba; pero, enseguida, dijo otra cosa:

—Si lord Warburton no te ha pedido que hables conmigo, es que lo estás haciendo sin interés alguno… o porque tienes ganas de discutir.

—No tengo el más mínimo deseo de discutir contigo. Lo único que quiero es dejarte tranquila. Lo que pasa es que me interesan muchísimo tus sentimientos.

—¡No sabes cuánto te lo agradezco! —exclamó Isabel con una risa un tanto nerviosa.

—Está claro que lo que quieres decir es que me estoy metiendo dónde no me llaman. Pero ¿por qué no puedo hablar contigo del asunto sin que tú te molestes y sin que yo me sienta incómodo? ¿De qué sirve que sea tu primo si no puedo disfrutar de algunos privilegios? ¿Qué sentido tiene que te adore sin esperar recompensa si no tengo algunas compensaciones? ¿Qué ventaja tiene estar enfermo e inútil y verme reducido a ser un mero espectador en el teatro de la vida si no puedo disfrutar de la función después de haber pagado tanto por la entrada? Dime una cosa —prosiguió Ralph mientras Isabel lo escuchaba con creciente atención—: ¿en qué pensabas cuando rechazaste a lord Warburton?

—¿En qué pensaba?

—¿Con qué lógica, qué visión de tu situación te dictó una decisión tan extraordinaria?

—No deseaba casarme con él, si es que eso puede llamarse lógica.

—No, eso no tiene que ver con la lógica, y yo ya lo sabía. Eso no quiere decir nada, sabes. ¿Qué fue lo que te dijiste a ti misma? Está claro que te dijiste más que eso.

Isabel reflexionó un momento, y a continuación contestó con otra pregunta:

—¿Por qué dices que fue una decisión extraordinaria? Eso es lo mismo que piensa tu madre.

—Warburton es una bellísima persona; como hombre, en mi opinión, apenas tiene defectos. Y, además, es lo que aquí se llama un excelente partido. Cuenta con inmensas posesiones, y su esposa sería considerada un ser superior. Warburton reúne en su persona tanto ventajas intrínsecas como extrínsecas.

Isabel observó a su primo como si quisiese ver hasta dónde quería llegar.

—Entonces lo rechacé por ser demasiado perfecto. Yo de perfecta no tengo nada, y él es demasiado bueno para mí. Además, tanta perfección no haría sino exasperarme.

—Eso es más ingenioso que sincero —dijo Ralph—. Lo cierto es que tú piensas que no hay nada en el mundo demasiado perfecto para ti.

—¿Tan buena crees que soy?

—No, pero, de todas formas, eres exigente, sin la excusa de creerte buena. Sin embargo, diecinueve de cada veinte

mujeres, hasta las más exigentes, se habrían conformado con Warburton. Tal vez no sepas cómo lo han perseguido.

—No quiero saberlo. Sin embargo, creo recordarlo —dijo Isabel—, un día que estábamos hablando de él, tú mencionaste la existencia de ciertas peculiaridades.

Ralph reflexionó mientras apuraba el cigarrillo.

—Espero que lo que entonces dije no te haya influido, porque no era a defectos a lo que yo me refería, sino simplemente a las particularidades de su posición. Si hubiese sabido que él quería casarse contigo, jamás habría aludido a ellas. Creo que lo que dije fue que, en lo que concierne a su posición, él era más bien escéptico. Habría estado en tus manos convertirlo en un creyente.

—No lo creo. Yo no entiendo de esos asuntos, y no soy consciente de tener ninguna misión de ese tipo. Es evidente que tú te sientes decepcionado —añadió Isabel, mirando a su primo con ternura y pesar—. Te habría gustado que hubiese contraído matrimonio con él.

—En absoluto. No albergo ningún deseo con respecto a ese asunto. No tengo la pretensión de darte ningún consejo, y me contento con observarte… con el más profundo interés.

Isabel exhaló un suspiro un tanto deliberado.

—¡Ojalá me encontrase yo igual de interesante de lo que me encuentras tú!

—De nuevo, en eso no eres sincera: te encuentras a ti misma extremadamente interesante. Sin embargo, ¿sabes una cosa? —dijo Ralph—, si es cierto que la respuesta que le has dado a Warburton es la definitiva, me alegro mucho de que haya sido esa. No estoy diciendo que me alegre por ti; ni mucho menos, claro está, que lo haga por él. Me alegro por mí.

—¿Es que estás pensando en proponerme matrimonio?

—En absoluto. Desde el punto de vista del que hablo, eso sería fatal: sería matar a la gallina de los huevos de oro, y para hacer una tortilla antes hay que romper los huevos. Utilizo al animal como símbolo de mis descabelladas ilusiones. Lo que quiero decir es que pienso disfrutar de la emoción de ver qué hace una joven que rechaza casarse con lord Warburton.

—Eso es con lo que cuenta también tu madre —dijo Isabel.

—¡Ah, es que va a haber un montón de espectadores! Vamos a estar muy pendientes del resto de tu trayectoria. Yo no podré verla hasta el final, pero lo más probable es que vea los años más interesantes. Por supuesto, si te casaras con nuestro amigo, también tendrías una trayectoria, una muy decente; de hecho, una muy brillante. Pero, hablando en términos relativos, sería un poco prosaica. Estaría definida por adelantado; carecería de elementos inesperados. Como sabes, yo siento una debilidad extrema por lo inesperado, y ahora que tú has decidido continuar en la partida, confío en que nos proporciones algún espléndido ejemplo de ello.

—No alcanzo a comprenderte del todo —dijo Isabel—, pero sí lo suficiente para poder decir que si esperas que yo te dé ejemplos espléndidos de algo, voy a decepcionarte.

—Solo ocurrirá tal cosa si te decepcionas a ti misma, y contigo eso sería algo muy difícil.

Isabel no respondió directamente a tales palabras; había en ellas una parte de verdad que merecía una reflexión. Por fin, dijo con brusquedad:

—No veo qué hay de malo en no tener deseos de atarme. No quiero empezar la vida casándome. Hay otras cosas que una mujer puede hacer.

—No hay nada que pueda hacer tan bien. Pero, claro, tú tienes muchas facetas.

—Con tener dos es suficiente —dijo Isabel.

—¡Tú eres el más encantador de los poliedros! —exclamó su acompañante. Sin embargo, ante la mirada de ella se puso serio, y para demostrarlo añadió—: Tú quieres vivir la vida y, como dicen los jóvenes, que te cuelguen si no lo haces.

—No creo que yo quiera vivirla de la misma forma que quieren hacerlo los jóvenes. Pero sí que quiero ver lo que pasa a mi alrededor.

—Quieres apurar la copa de la experiencia.

—No, no tengo deseos de apurar la copa de la experiencia. ¡Es una bebida envenenada! Lo único que quiero es ver las cosas por mí misma.

—Quieres verlo, pero no sentirlo —apuntó Ralph.

—No creo que si se es una criatura sensible se pueda hacer tal distinción. Yo soy muy parecida a Henrietta. El otro día, cuando le pregunté si le apetecía casarse, su respuesta fue: «No hasta que haya visto Europa». Yo tampoco quiero

casarme hasta haber visto Europa.

—Es evidente que esperas que alguna testa coronada caiga rendida ante ti.

—No, eso sería peor que casarse con lord Warburton. Pero está haciéndose de noche —continuó Isabel—, y tengo que volver.

Se levantó de su sitio, pero Ralph continuó sentado, sin dejar de mirarla. Al ver que él no se movía, Isabel se detuvo y entre los dos se cruzó una mirada, llena en ambos casos, pero sobre todo en el de Ralph, de declaraciones demasiado vagas para expresarlas con palabras.

—Has respondido a mi pregunta —dijo el joven al fin—. Me has dicho lo que quería saber. Te estoy enormemente agradecido.

—Me parece a mí que te he dicho poca cosa.

—Me has dicho las cosas importantes: que el mundo te interesa y que quieres lanzarte a él.

Los ojos plateados de Isabel refulgieron un instante en la penumbra.

—Nunca he dicho semejante cosa.

—Creo que era eso lo que querías decir. No lo refutes. ¡Es muy hermoso!

—No sé qué es lo que tratas de atribuirme, ya que no soy en absoluto un espíritu aventurero. Las mujeres no son como los hombres.

Ralph se levantó despacio de su asiento y caminaron juntos hasta la cancela de entrada a la plaza.

—No —dijo—; las mujeres rara vez alardean de su valor. Los hombres sí que lo hacen con cierta frecuencia.

—Los hombres pueden alardear de él porque lo tienen.

—También las mujeres lo tienen. Tú tienes mucho.

—El suficiente para regresar en coche al hotel Pratt, pero no más.

Ralph abrió la cancela y, una vez que hubieron salido, la cerró de nuevo.

—Vamos a buscarte un coche —dijo; y cuando se encaminaban a una calle cercana en la que había más posibilidades de encontrar uno, le preguntó una vez más si no podía acompañarla para dejarla sana y salva en el hotel.

—De ninguna manera —respondió ella—; estás muy cansado. Debes volver a casa e irte a la cama.

Encontraron un coche. Ralph la ayudó a subir y se quedó un momento junto a la portezuela.

—Cuando la gente se olvida de que soy una pobre criatura, a menudo me incomoda —dijo—, pero es aún peor cuando me lo recuerdan.

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Isabel no albergaba ningún motivo oculto para negarse a que Ralph la acompañase al hotel; simplemente le parecía que en los últimos días había consumido una cantidad desmesurada de su tiempo, y el espíritu independiente de la joven estadounidense, a la que un exceso de ayuda empujaba a adoptar una actitud que al final le resultaba «afectada», la había impulsado a decidir que durante unas cuantas horas debía bastarse a sí misma. Además, sentía gran inclinación por vivir momentos en soledad, algo que, desde su llegada a Inglaterra, apenas había podido satisfacer. Era un lujo del que siempre había podido disfrutar en su casa y que conscientemente se había estado negando. Esa noche, sin embargo, tuvo lugar un incidente que, si hubiera habido allí un crítico para tomar nota, habría dejado sin argumentos la teoría de que el deseo de estar completamente a solas era lo que la había impulsado a prescindir de la compañía de su primo. Hacia las nueve de la noche, sentada bajo la tenue iluminación del hotel Pratt y tratando de enfrascarse, con la ayuda de dos largas velas, en la lectura de un volumen que había traído consigo de Gardencourt, no lograba leer otras palabras que unas que no estaban impresas en la página: las palabras que Ralph le había dicho esa tarde. De repente, sonaron en la puerta los nudillos muy quedos de un camarero, lo que sirvió de preludio a la entrega, casi como si de un trofeo glorioso se tratase, de una tarjeta de visita. Cuando ante su mirada fija se dibujó en la cartulina el nombre del señor Caspar Goodwood, Isabel dejó al hombre allí plantado y esperando sin comunicarle sus deseos.

—¿Quiere que haga subir al caballero, señora? —preguntó el hombre con una inflexión que parecía querer alentarla.

Isabel seguía vacilante y, mientras dudaba, se miró en el espejo.

—Hágalo pasar —dijo al fin, y lo esperó tratando más de fortalecer el espíritu que de alisarse el cabello.

Al cabo de un momento, Caspar Goodwood estaba estrechándole la mano, pero sin decir nada hasta que el sirviente hubo abandonado la estancia.

—¿Por qué no ha contestado usted a mi carta? —preguntó entonces él, en tono rápido, rotundo y un tanto perentorio, el tono de un hombre cuyas preguntas estaban normalmente cargadas de intención y que era capaz de ser muy insistente.

Isabel respondió con otra pregunta pronta:

—¿Cómo sabía usted que me encontraba aquí?

—Me lo comunicó la señorita Stackpole —dijo Caspar Goodwood—. Me dijo que lo más probable era que se encontrase usted sola esta noche y que estaría dispuesta a verme.

—¿Dónde se ha visto con usted para… para decirle eso?

—No se ha visto conmigo; me escribió.

Isabel se quedó en silencio; ninguno de los dos se había sentado, y permanecían en pie con aire desafiante, o cuando menos de contención.

—Henrietta nunca me dijo que se estaba escribiendo con usted —dijo ella al fin—. No es muy correcto de su parte.

—¿Es que le resulta tan desagradable verme? —preguntó el joven.

—No me lo esperaba. Y no me gustan las sorpresas de este tipo.

—Pero usted sabía que me encontraba en la ciudad. Era natural que nos encontráramos.

—¿Considera usted esto un encuentro? Yo esperaba no verlo. En un lugar tan grande como Londres me parecía muy posible.

—Por lo que parece, hasta escribirme le resultaba repugnante —prosiguió su visitante.

Isabel no respondió; la sensación de la traición de Henrietta Stackpole, como la consideró en aquel momento, era muy intensa en su interior.

—Está claro que Henrietta no es precisamente un modelo de delicadeza —comentó con amargura—. Se ha tomado demasiadas libertades.

—Supongo que yo tampoco soy ningún modelo, ni de esas ni de otras virtudes. La culpa es tanto mía como suya.

Al mirarle, Isabel tuvo la impresión de que la mandíbula de él nunca había sido más cuadrada. Eso podría haberle

resultado desagradable, pero su reacción fue muy distinta.

—No, la culpa no es tanto suya como de ella. Supongo que, tratándose de usted, lo que ha hecho era inevitable.

—¡Desde luego que lo era! —exclamó Caspar Goodwood con risa forzada—. Y ahora que ya estoy aquí, ¿puedo quedarme?

—Puede sentarse, por supuesto.

Isabel regresó a su asiento, mientras que su visitante se acomodó en el primer sitio que encontró, como haría cualquier hombre acostumbrado a prestar poca atención a ese tipo de detalles.

—Me he pasado los días esperando su respuesta a mi carta. Podría haberme escrito siquiera unas líneas.

—No fue la molestia de escribir lo que me impidió hacerlo; igual me hubiese costado escribirle una página que cuatro. Pero mi silencio era intencionado —dijo Isabel—. Pensé que era lo mejor.

El joven mantuvo los ojos clavados en los de ella mientras hablaba; después bajó la mirada y la fijó en un punto de la alfombra, como si estuviese haciendo un gran esfuerzo para no decir más de lo debido. Era un hombre fuerte que había dado un paso en falso, y tenía la agudeza suficiente para darse cuenta de que una exhibición gratuita de dicha fuerza no haría sino poner de relieve la falsedad de ese paso. Isabel era perfectamente capaz de sacar partido de una persona en la situación de su pretendiente, y aunque no estuviese muy deseosa de lanzárselo a la cara, podría darse el gusto de decirle: «Usted sabe bien que no debería haberme escrito», y de decírselo con aire de triunfo.

Caspar Goodwood alzó de nuevo los ojos hasta encontrarse con los de ella, y parecieron refulgir tras la visera de un casco. Tenía un profundo sentido de la justicia y estaba dispuesto en todo momento, en aquel o en cualquier otro, a defender la cuestión de sus derechos.

—Usted dijo que esperaba no volver jamás a tener noticias mías, lo sé. Pero yo nunca acepté como propia una imposición de esas características. Le advertí de que muy pronto las tendría.

—Yo no dije que no quería volver a saber nunca más de usted —dijo Isabel.

—Pues entonces querría decir en los próximos cinco años, o en diez o en veinte. Para el caso, es lo mismo.

—¿Eso cree? A mí me parece que hay una gran diferencia. Yo soy capaz de imaginar que dentro de diez años podríamos mantener una correspondencia muy agradable. Para entonces habré mejorado mi estilo epistolar.

Desvió la mirada mientras pronunciaba aquellas palabras, consciente de que tenían un matiz mucho menos serio que el semblante de su interlocutor. Sus ojos, sin embargo, volvieron de nuevo hacia él, justo en el momento en que, sin venir mucho a cuento, le preguntaba:

—¿Está disfrutando de la visita a su tío?

—Muchísimo, por supuesto. —Hizo una pausa, para después soltarle—: ¿Qué espera usted ganar insistiendo?

—Espero no perderla.

—No tiene ningún derecho a hablar de perder lo que no le pertenece. E incluso aunque usted tenga otro punto de vista —añadió Isabel—, debería saber cuándo hay que dejar a alguien en paz.

—Le desagrado a usted muchísimo —dijo Caspar Goodwood con tristeza, no con ánimo de provocar en ella compasión hacia un hombre consciente de un hecho tan descorazonador, sino más bien para dejárselo bien claro a sí mismo y actuar en consecuencia teniendo aquello muy presente.

—Sí, no me agrada usted en absoluto. En este momento, no encaja de ninguna manera, y lo peor es que querer comprobarlo de esta forma es bastante innecesario.

No era ciertamente que la naturaleza de él fuese tan débil como para sacarle sangre con el pinchazo de un alfiler; y ya desde el primer momento de su relación con él, y tras haber tenido que defenderse frente a cierta actitud suya de saber lo que a ella le convenía mejor que ella misma, había aceptado el hecho de que la franqueza absoluta era su mejor arma. Intentar no herir su sensibilidad o escabullirse de él esquivándolo, tal como podía hacerse con otro hombre que se interceptase en su camino con menor porfía, algo así, en el caso de Caspar Goodwood, que se aferraba a cuanto se le ofrecía, fuese esto lo que fuese, no era sino desperdiciar la agilidad de uno. No era que él no pudiese ser susceptible, pero su pasividad exterior, al igual que su actividad, era de gran dureza, y se podía contar siempre con la seguridad de que, cuando hubiese necesidad de ello, se curaría las heridas él solo. E Isabel, pese a calibrar las posibles penas y dolores que él pudiera sufrir, recuperó la antigua sensación de que Goodwood tenía una coraza natural, de que estaba blindado y armado fundamentalmente para repeler cualquier agresión.

—Me resulta imposible hacerme a la idea —se limitó a decir él.

Y había en esas palabras una peligrosa generosidad, pues Isabel era consciente de que bien podía recordarle él que no siempre lo había encontrado desagradable.

—A mí también me resulta imposible, y no es esa la situación que debería existir entre nosotros. Si tan solo pudiese borrarme de su mente unos cuantos meses, volveríamos a llevarnos bien de nuevo.

—Comprendo. Si yo dejase de pensar en usted por completo durante un tiempo determinado, descubriría que podría seguir sin hacerlo indefinidamente.

—Indefinidamente es más de lo que le estoy pidiendo. Es más incluso de lo que a mí me gustaría.

—Sabe que lo que pide es imposible —dijo el joven, empleando el adjetivo como algo irrefutable, cosa que a ella le resultó irritante.

—¿Es que es usted incapaz de hacer un esfuerzo calculado? —preguntó—. Es fuerte para todo lo demás, ¿por qué razón no iba a serlo para esto?

—¿Un esfuerzo calculado con qué fin? —Y al instante, mientras ella retardaba el ataque, añadió—: Con respecto a usted, soy incapaz de hacer nada, salvo estar endemoniadamente enamorado. Y cuanto más fuerte es uno, con más fuerza ama.

—En eso tiene mucha razón. —Y no cabe duda de que nuestra joven heroína percibía aquella fuerza, como arrojada en medio de la inmensidad de la verdad y la poesía, casi como un señuelo para su imaginación. Pero se repuso con rapidez—. Piense en mí o no, lo que le resulte más fácil. Solo quiero que me deje en paz.

—¿Hasta cuándo?

—Pues uno o dos años.

—¿Cuántos años exactamente? Entre uno y dos hay una tremenda diferencia.

—Digamos que dos, entonces —dijo Isabel con estudiado aire de vehemencia.

—¿Y qué voy a ganar yo con ello? —preguntó su amigo sin dar señales de amilanarse.

—Hará que le quede en extremo agradecida.

—¿Y cuál será mi recompensa?

—¿Necesita que se le recompense un acto de generosidad?

—Sí, cuando entraña un enorme sacrificio.

—No hay generosidad sin sacrificio. Los hombres no entienden esas cosas. Si usted hace ese sacrificio, contará con toda mi admiración.

—Me importa un bledo su admiración… me trae sin cuidado, si no obtengo nada a cambio. ¿Cuándo se casará usted conmigo? Esa es la única pregunta.

—Jamás, si continúa haciéndome sentir como ahora.

—¿Qué salgo ganando entonces por no tratar de hacerla sentir de otra manera?

—Saldrá ganando lo mismo que si sigue molestándome sin cesar. —Gaspar Goodwood bajó la mirada una vez más y contempló un momento la copa de su sombrero. Un rubor intenso se extendió por su rostro; Isabel vio que su dureza al fin había hecho mella en él. De inmediato, aquello adquirió para ella el valor de algo clásico, romántico, redentor… ¿qué sabía? «El dolor del hombre fuerte» era una de las categorías del atractivo humano, por poco que fuese el encanto que de él se desprendiera en ese caso concreto—. ¿Por qué me obliga a decirle estas cosas? —preguntó con voz temblorosa—. Yo solo quiero mostrarme amable, ser de lo más bondadosa. No me resulta agradable que haya personas que se interesen por mí y que tenga que ser yo la que se vea obligada a intentar disuadirlas. Creo que también les corresponde a los demás mostrarse considerados; cada uno tiene que juzgar por sí mismo. Yo sé que usted es considerado, todo lo considerado que puede ser, y que cuenta con buenas razones para hacer lo que está haciendo. Pero lo cierto es que no siento deseos de casarme, ni tampoco de hablar del asunto en este momento. Lo más probable es que no lo haga nunca… no, jamás. Tengo perfecto derecho a opinar así, y no está bien presionar a una mujer con tanta insistencia, instarla a ir en contra de su voluntad. Si le causo dolor, solo puedo decir que lo siento mucho. No es culpa mía, no puedo casarme con usted simplemente por complacerle. No le diré que siempre seré su amiga, porque cuando las mujeres dicen eso, en situaciones así, se interpreta, creo, como una especie de burla. Pero trate de comprobarlo algún día.

Durante este parlamento, Caspar Goodwood había mantenido la mirada fija en la etiqueta con el nombre de su sombrerero, y no la alzó de nuevo hasta algún tiempo después de que ella hubiese cesado de hablar. Cuando lo hizo, descubrió en el rostro sonrosado de Isabel una expresión tan sincera y encantadora que no hizo sino aumentar su confusión al tratar de analizar sus palabras.

—Me vuelvo a casa… lo haré mañana… la dejaré en paz —acertó a decir al fin—. Solo que… —añadió con pesadumbre—, odio tener que dejar de verla.

—No tema. No haré nada malo.

—Estoy tan seguro como de que estoy aquí sentado de que se casará con otro —declaró Caspar Goodwood.

—¿Le parece esa una acusación justa?

—¿Por qué no? Habrá infinidad de hombres que lo intenten.

—Acabo de decirle que no siento deseos de casarme y que tengo casi total certeza de que jamás lo haré.

—Ya lo sé, y me ha gustado eso de «casi total certeza». No tengo fe alguna en lo que acaba de decir.

—Muchísimas gracias. ¿Me está acusando de mentir para librarme de usted? Dice unas cosas de gran delicadeza.

—¿Y por qué no iba a decirlas? Usted no me ha dado garantías de nada.

—¡Hasta ahí podíamos llegar!

—Quizá se crea incluso a salvo… a fuerza de desearlo. Pero no es así —continuó el joven, como preparándose para lo peor.

—Muy bien, pues. Digamos que no estoy a salvo. Como usted quiera.

—De todas formas —dijo Caspar Goodwood—, no sé si podría impedirlo aunque no la perdiese de vista.

—¿De veras no lo sabe? Después de todo, yo le tengo mucho miedo. ¿Es que cree que soy tan fácil de contentar? —preguntó Isabel de repente, cambiando de tono.

—No, no lo creo. Y trataré de consolarme con eso. Pero no cabe duda de que en el mundo hay un buen número de hombres deslumbrantes; y con que solo hubiese uno sería suficiente. El más deslumbrante de todos irá derecho a por usted. Usted se asegurará de no aceptar a nadie que no lo sea.

—Si con deslumbrante quiere decir de inteligencia brillante —dijo Isabel—, y no imagino qué otra cosa querría decir, yo no necesito la ayuda de un hombre inteligente que me enseñe cómo vivir. Soy capaz de descubrirlo por mí misma.

—¿De descubrir cómo vivir en soledad? Espero que, cuando lo haya hecho, me enseñe a mí.

Isabel lo miró un instante, y a continuación dijo con una fugaz sonrisa:

—¡Ah, usted sí que debería casarse!

Habrá que perdonar a Caspar Goodwood si por un instante aquella exclamación le sonó a algo infernal, y no tenemos constancia de que el motivo de Isabel para dispararle semejante dardo estuviese muy claro. De lo que sí estaba segura es de que él no debería mostrarse hambriento, desesperado.

—¡Que Dios la perdone! —murmuró el joven entre dientes, al tiempo que se daba la vuelta para marcharse.

El énfasis de Isabel la había puesto un poco en evidencia, y tras un momento ella sintió la necesidad de aclarar su posición. La forma más fácil de hacerlo era colocarlo en el lugar que había ocupado ella.

—Está siendo terriblemente injusto conmigo, habla usted de lo que no sabe —le espetó—. Yo no sería una presa fácil, ya lo he demostrado.

—Está claro que a mí, sí.

—También se lo he demostrado a otros. —Y se detuvo un instante—. La semana pasada rechacé una proposición de matrimonio, una de de esas que, sin duda, se consideran deslumbrantes.

—Me alegro mucho de saberlo —dijo el joven con gravedad.

—Era una proposición que muchas jóvenes habrían aceptado; tenía todo para hacerla recomendable. —Isabel no se había propuesto contar la historia, pero, ahora que había empezado, la satisfacción de hablar con franqueza y de hacerse justicia se apoderó de ella—. Me ofreció una inmejorable posición y una inmensa fortuna… una persona que me gusta extraordinariamente.

Caspar la contempló con profundo interés.

—¿Se trata de un inglés?

—De un noble inglés —dijo Isabel.

Su visitante recibió el anuncio en silencio en un principio, pero después dijo:

—Me alegro de que se haya quedado decepcionado.

—Pues, en ese caso, ya que tiene compañeros de infortunio, consuélese.

—Yo no puedo considerarlo un compañero —dijo Caspar con tristeza.

—¿Por qué no, si yo rechacé de plano su ofrecimiento?

—Eso no lo convierte en compañero mío. Además, es un inglés.

—¿Es que los ingleses no son seres humanos? —preguntó Isabel.

—¿Quién, esa gente? Esos no forman parte de mi humanidad, y me trae sin cuidado lo que les suceda.

—Está usted muy enojado —dijo la joven—. Ya hemos hablado del asunto más que suficiente.

—Claro que estoy muy enojado. ¡De eso me declaro culpable!

Isabel se alejó de él, se dirigió a la ventana abierta y se quedó un momento contemplando el oscuro vacío de la calle, en la que una mortecina farola de gas representaba la única animación social. Durante algún tiempo, ninguno de los dos jóvenes habló. Caspar permaneció junto a la chimenea con la mirada triste fija en ella. Isabel prácticamente le había pedido que se fuese, lo sabía; pero aun a riesgo de resultar odioso, tenía que mantenerse firme. La joven era una necesidad que había alimentado demasiado para renunciar fácilmente a ella, y había cruzado el océano con el único propósito de arrancarle aunque fuera una mínima promesa. Al fin, la joven se apartó de la ventana y se plantó ante él.

—Me hace usted muy poca justicia, después de todo lo que acabo de contarle. Me arrepiento de habérselo dicho, ya que a usted le importa tan poco.

—¡Ah, estaba usted pensando en mí cuando lo hizo!

Y se interrumpió al instante, por miedo a que ella contradijese un pensamiento tan feliz.

—Estaba pensando un poco en usted —dijo Isabel.

—¿Un poco? No lo entiendo. Si el saber lo que siento por usted influyó algo en su decisión, decir que pensaba «un poco» en mí no es algo para tener muy en cuenta.

Isabel negó con la cabeza como si quisiese desechar un error garrafal.

—He rechazado al más bondadoso y noble de los caballeros. Confórmese con eso.

—En tal caso, se lo agradezco —dijo Caspar Goodwood con gravedad—. Se lo agradezco inmensamente.

—Y ahora será mejor que se vaya.

—¿Me deja que vuelva a verla?

—Creo que será mejor que no. Querrá usted volver a hablar de esto y, como ve, no conduce a nada.

—Le prometo que no diré ni una sola palabra que pueda molestarla.

Isabel reflexionó un momento y después respondió:

—Dentro de un par de días regreso a casa de mi tío, y no puedo proponerle que vaya usted allí. No tendría demasiada lógica.

Caspar Goodwood, por su parte, se quedó pensando.

—Usted también tiene que hacerme justicia a mí. Recibí una invitación para ir a casa de su tío hace más de una semana, y la decliné.

Isabel dejó traslucir su sorpresa.

—¿De quién era la invitación?

—Del señor Ralph Touchett, quien imagino es primo suyo. La decliné porque no contaba con autorización de usted para aceptarla. Al parecer, la idea de que el señor Touchett me invitase fue cosa de la señorita Stackpole.

—Desde luego, no salió de mí. La verdad es que Henrietta ha ido demasiado lejos.

—No sea demasiado dura con ella… esto es por mí.

—No; si usted declinó la invitación, hizo lo correcto, y yo se lo agradezco.

E Isabel experimentó un estremecimiento de horror al pensar que lord Warburton y Caspar Goodwood podrían haber coincidido en Gardencourt: habría resultado de lo más embarazoso para lord Warburton.

—Cuando se vaya de casa de su tío, ¿adónde irá? —preguntó su acompañante.

—Me iré de viaje con mi tía, a Florencia y otros lugares.

La serenidad con que lo anunció hizo que al joven se le helara el corazón; le pareció verla arrastrada a una órbita de la que él quedaba excluido sin remedio. No obstante, continuó de inmediato con sus preguntas.

—¿Y cuándo regresará a Estados Unidos?

—Quizá no lo haga en mucho tiempo. Soy muy feliz aquí.

—¿Piensa renunciar a su país?

—¡No sea criatura!

—Bueno, lo que sí está claro es que la perderé de vista.

—No lo sé —respondió Isabel de forma un tanto grandilocuente—. El mundo, con todos esos lugares tan organizados y tan próximos unos de otros, da la impresión de ser bastante pequeño.

—¡Pues a mí me parece excesivamente grande! —exclamó Caspar con una sencillez que a nuestra joven dama le habría parecido conmovedora de no haber tomado la resolución de no hacer ningún tipo de concesiones.

Tal actitud era parte de un sistema, de una teoría que Isabel había abrazado en los últimos tiempos, y para no quedarse a medias, añadió tras un momento:

—No me considere dura si le digo que es precisamente eso, estar lejos de su vista, lo que yo quiero. Si estuviese usted cerca, tendría la sensación de que me estaba vigilando, y a mí eso no me agrada. Amo demasiado mi libertad. Si hay algo en el mundo que de verdad estimo —prosiguió empleando de nuevo un ligero tono altisonante— es mi independencia personal.

Sin embargo, el tono de superioridad con el que pronunció aquellas palabras no hizo sino despertar la admiración de Caspar Goodwood; nada en toda aquella grandilocuencia le causó rechazo. Jamás se la había imaginado carente de alas y sin necesidad de moverse con absoluta libertad; él, con sus largos brazos y sus grandes zancadas, no sentía temor alguno de aquella fuerza que había en ella. Si con aquellas palabras Isabel se había propuesto causarle alguna conmoción, había errado su objetivo y lo único que había conseguido era hacerle sonreír al ver que en algo estaban de acuerdo.

—¿Quién tendría menos deseos de coartar su libertad que yo? ¿Qué puede proporcionarme más placer que saberla completamente independiente y haciendo lo que le apetece? Es para hacerla independiente por lo que quiero casarme con usted.

—Ese es un hermoso sofisma —dijo la joven con una sonrisa aún más hermosa.

—Una mujer soltera, una joven de su edad, no es independiente. Hay toda una serie de cosas que no puede hacer. Tropieza con obstáculos a cada paso.

—Eso dependerá de cómo considere la cuestión —respondió Isabel con mucho brío—. Yo ya no estoy en mi primera juventud; puedo hacer lo que me parezca… pertenezco más bien a la categoría de personas independientes. No tengo padre ni madre; soy pobre y de carácter serio; no soy bonita. Por consiguiente, no estoy obligada a ser tímida ni convencional; de hecho, esos son lujos que no puedo permitirme. Además, trato de juzgar las cosas por mí misma; creo que es mejor equivocarse al juzgar que no hacer ningún juicio. No quiero ser una mera oveja en el rebaño; quiero elegir mi propio destino y conocer los asuntos humanos más allá de lo que otros consideran correcto contarme. —Se interrumpió un momento, pero no lo suficiente para darle tiempo a su interlocutor a responder. Este parecía a punto de hacerlo cuando ella añadió—: Deje que le diga una cosa, señor Goodwood: es usted muy amable al decir que tiene miedo de que me case. Si alguna vez le llega el rumor de que estoy a punto de hacerlo (las jóvenes estamos expuestas a que se digan esas cosas de nosotras), recuerde lo que le he dicho sobre mi amor a la libertad y opte por ponerlo en duda.

Había algo apasionadamente positivo en el tono que empleó al darle aquel consejo, y la sinceridad que brillaba en sus ojos sirvió para que Caspar creyese en sus palabras. Este se sintió en general tranquilizado, y eso es algo que se pudo apreciar en la forma, un tanto vehemente, en que dijo:

—Entonces, ¿lo que sencillamente quiere es viajar durante dos años? Yo estoy completamente dispuesto a esperar dos años y a que usted pueda hacer lo que le apetezca en ese tiempo. Si eso es lo único que quiere, le ruego que me lo diga. No quiero que sea convencional; ¿acaso le parezco yo convencional? ¿Quiere cultivar su espíritu? A mí su espíritu me parece suficientemente cultivado; pero si tiene interés en deambular durante un tiempo por el mundo y ver países diferentes, estaré encantado en ayudarle en todo cuanto esté en mi mano.

—Es usted muy generoso; no es algo nuevo para mí. La mejor manera que tiene de ayudarme es poner entre nosotros el mayor número de millas de agua posible.

—¡Cualquiera diría que va a cometer alguna atrocidad! —dijo Caspar Goodwood.

—Quizá la haga. Quiero ser libre para poder incluso hacer algo así si se me antoja.

—Muy bien, en ese caso —dijo él lentamente—, regresaré a casa.

Y le tendió la mano, intentando parecer satisfecho y confiado.

La confianza que Isabel tenía en él, sin embargo, era mucho mayor que la que Caspar podía depositar en la joven. No es que la creyera capaz de hacer una atrocidad; pero, le diese las vueltas que le diese, había algo ominoso en la forma en que ella se reservaba el derecho a tal opción. Cuando Isabel estrechó su mano, sintió un gran respeto hacia él: sabía cuánto la quería y le pareció muy magnánimo. Se quedaron un momento así, mirándose, unidos en un apretón de manos que no era meramente pasivo por parte de la joven.

—Está haciendo bien —dijo amablemente, casi con ternura—. No va a perder nada por ser razonable.

—Pero volveré dentro de dos años, esté usted donde esté.

Como ya hemos visto antes, nuestra joven dama no se mostraba precisamente coherente, y al oír aquello cambió de

repente el tono.

—Ah, no lo olvide: no le he prometido nada, nada en absoluto. —A continuación, con más suavidad, como para hacerle más fácil la despedida, añadió—: Y no olvide tampoco que no seré una presa fácil.

—Va a acabar usted harta de su independencia.

—Puede que así sea; es incluso muy probable. Cuando ese día llegue, me alegrará infinito verlo.

Isabel había apoyado la mano en el picaporte de la puerta que llevaba a su habitación, y esperó un momento para ver si su visitante se marchaba. Pero él parecía incapaz de moverse; mostraba todavía una inmensa renuencia en su actitud y en sus ojos se leía un triste reproche.

—Ahora tengo que dejarlo —dijo la joven; y abrió la puerta y entró en la otra habitación.

La estancia estaba a oscuras, pero la oscuridad se veía atenuada por un resplandor difuso que entraba por la ventana desde el patio del hotel, e Isabel fue capaz de distinguir las siluetas de los muebles, el brillo apagado del espejo y el perfil de la imponente cama de dosel. Se quedó un instante inmóvil, a la escucha, y al fin oyó a Caspar Goodwood abandonar la sala y cerrar la puerta tras él. Permaneció quieta un poco más y, a continuación, llevada por un impulso irresistible, se dejó caer de rodillas ante la cama y escondió el rostro entre los brazos.

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No estaba Isabel rezando, sino temblando, temblando de pies a cabeza. Sufría temblores fácilmente; de hecho, eran una constante en ella, y en ese momento se dio cuenta de que salía de ella un sonido como el tañido de un arpa. Pese a que su único deseo era meterse bajo la colcha, quedar de nuevo envuelta en el tejido marrón de holanda, deseaba oponer resistencia a la excitación que la embargaba, y aquella actitud devota, que mantuvo durante algún tiempo, pareció ayudarla a aquietarse. Se alegraba infinito de que Caspar Goodwood se hubiera ido; había algo en aquella forma de librarse de él que era como la cancelación, contra recibo sellado, de una deuda que la había atormentado durante demasiado tiempo. Al sentir el reconfortante alivio, inclinó la cabeza un poco más; la sensación estaba allí, latiendo en su corazón; formaba parte de su emoción, pero también algo de lo que sentirse avergonzada, algo profano y fuera de lugar. Pasaron todavía unos diez minutos antes de que se incorporase de su genuflexión, e incluso cuando fue de nuevo al saloncito, el temblor no había cesado por completo. Se debía, en verdad, a dos causas: en parte, a la larga conversación con el señor Goodwood, pero era de temer que el resto obedeciese simplemente a la satisfacción que le causaba el ejercicio de su poder. Volvió a tomar asiento en la misma butaca y cogió su libro, aunque sin hacer nada por abrirlo. Se reclinó en el asiento, y exhaló aquel murmullo quedo, suave y sibilante que era a menudo la forma en la que expresaba su respuesta ante acontecimientos cuyo lado bueno no era fácil apreciar, y dejó que la embargase el gozo por haber rechazado a dos ardientes pretendientes en un par de semanas. Aquel amor a la libertad que con tanta audacia había descrito a Caspar Goodwood apenas era todavía puramente teórico; no había tenido oportunidad de ejercitarlo a gran escala. No obstante, le parecía que algo había hecho: había saboreado el placer, si no de la batalla, al menos de la victoria; había actuado en consecuencia con su plan. En medio del fulgor de tal conclusión, la imagen del señor Goodwood caminando triste a través de la lúgubre ciudad de vuelta a casa irrumpió de súbito con cierta fuerza acusadora. Así que, cuando en aquel mismo momento se abrió la puerta, Isabel se levantó con miedo de que él hubiese regresado. Pero solo era Henrietta Stackpole que volvía de su cena.

La señorita Stackpole se dio cuenta de inmediato de que a nuestra joven dama le había sucedido algo, aunque tampoco era preciso ser muy perspicaz para hacer tal descubrimiento. Se acercó sin dilación a su amiga, que la recibió sin siquiera saludarla. La euforia de Isabel por haber enviado a Caspar Goodwood de vuelta a Estados Unidos presuponía alegrarse en cierto modo de que el joven hubiese ido a visitarla; pero, al mismo tiempo, no olvidaba en absoluto que Henrietta no había tenido derecho alguno a tenderle aquella trampa.

—¿Ha estado él aquí, querida?

Isabel le volvió la espalda y tardó unos momentos en contestar.

—Lo que has hecho ha estado muy mal —declaró al fin.

—Lo hice con la mejor de las intenciones. Solo espero que tú hayas actuado igual.

—Tú no eres quién para juzgar. No puedo fiarme de ti —dijo Isabel.

No es que semejante declaración fuese precisamente halagadora, pero Henrietta era demasiado espléndida para tener en cuenta el reproche que encerraba; lo único que le importaba era lo que daba a entender con respecto a su amiga.

—Isabel Archer —observó con igual brusquedad y solemnidad—, como te cases con uno de estos individuos, no volveré a dirigirte la palabra.

—Antes de lanzar una amenaza tan terrible, será mejor que esperes a que me lo propongan —respondió Isabel, quien, como no le había dicho una sola palabra a Henrietta de la declaración de lord Warburton, no sentía en ese momento el más mínimo deseo de justificarse ante ella contándole que había rechazado al aristócrata.

—Ya, pero te lo propondrán sin tardanza, una vez que hayas desembarcado en el continente. A Annie Climber le hicieron tres proposiciones en Italia… a la pobre Annie, con lo poco atractiva que es.

—Bueno, pues si Annie Climber no se dejó atrapar, ¿por qué lo iba a hacer yo?

—No creo que a Annie le insistiesen mucho; pero a ti sí que lo harán.

—Tu certeza resulta muy halagadora —dijo Isabel sin alarmarse.

—¡No estoy halagándote, Isabel, te estoy diciendo la verdad! —exclamó su amiga—. Espero que no vayas a

contarme que no le has dado ninguna esperanza al señor Goodwood.

—No veo por qué tendría que contarte nada; como acabo de decirte, no me fío de ti. Pero, puesto que te muestras tan interesada en el señor Goodwood, no te ocultaré que se dispone a regresar a Estados Unidos de inmediato.

—¿No me estarás diciendo que lo has mandado a paseo? —preguntó Henrietta casi a gritos.

—Le pedí que me dejase en paz; y te pido a ti lo mismo, Henrietta. —La consternación se reflejó por un instante en el rostro de la señorita Stackpole, quien a continuación se dirigió al espejo que había sobre la chimenea y se despojó del sombrero—. Espero que hayas disfrutado de tu cena —añadió Isabel.

Pero su interlocutora no se dejó distraer por tales frivolidades.

—¿Sabes adónde te diriges, Isabel Archer?

—En este momento, me dirijo a la cama —dijo Isabel con persistente frivolidad.

—¿Eres consciente de hacia dónde te estás dejando arrastrar? —insistió Henrietta mientras sostenía el sombrero con delicadeza.

—No, no tengo la más mínima idea, y me resulta muy agradable no saberlo. Un carruaje avanzando veloz en la oscuridad de la noche, tirado por cuatro caballos y traqueteando por caminos que apenas se ven… esa es mi idea de la felicidad.

—Está claro que no ha sido el señor Goodwood quien te ha enseñado a decir semejantes cosas… más propias de la heroína de una novela inmoral —dijo la señorita Stackpole—. Te estás dejando arrastrar a cometer un inmenso error.

Isabel se sentía irritada por la intromisión de su amiga, pero, aun así, trató de pensar qué podía haber de verdad en aquella declaración. No logró descubrir nada que le impidiese decir:

—Debes de tenerme mucho aprecio, Henrietta, para estar dispuesta a mostrarte tan agresiva.

—Te quiero profundamente, Isabel —dijo emocionada la señorita Stackpole.

—Pues, si me quieres profundamente, déjame en paz del mismo modo. Eso es lo que le he pedido al señor Goodwood, y lo que te pido a ti también.

—Ten cuidado, no te dejemos demasiado en paz.

—Eso es lo que me dijo el señor Goodwood. Yo le contesté que tengo que asumir el riesgo.

—Te encanta el riesgo… ¡qué miedo me das! —exclamó Henrietta—. ¿Cuándo regresa el señor Goodwood a Estados Unidos?

—No lo sé, no me lo dijo.

—Tal vez no se lo preguntaste —dijo Henrietta con tono de justificada ironía.

—Le di tan pocas satisfacciones que no me sentí con derecho a hacerle preguntas.

Por un momento, a la señorita Stackpole se le antojó que una afirmación semejante desafiaba todo comentario, pero al fin profirió:

—Desde luego, Isabel, si no te conociese, pensaría que no tienes razón.

—Ten cuidado —dijo Isabel—, me consientes demasiado.

—Mucho me temo que ya lo he hecho. Espero que, por lo menos —añadió la señorita Stackpole—, el señor Goodwood coincida con Annie Climber en el viaje de vuelta.

Isabel se enteró a la mañana siguiente de que Henrietta no tenía intención de regresar a Gardencourt (donde el anciano señor Touchett le había asegurado que sería de nuevo bienvenida), sino de esperar en Londres la llegada de la invitación que el señor Bantling le había prometido que recibiría de su hermana, lady Pensil. La señorita Stackpole le contó con todo detalle su conversación con aquel sociable amigo de Ralph Touchett y le aseguró a Isabel que estaba convencida de que ahora tenía algo que la conduciría a algo importante. En cuanto recibiera la misiva de lady Pensil, y el señor Bantling prácticamente le había garantizado la llegada de tal documento, partiría de inmediato hacia Bedfordshire, y si a Isabel le apetecía saber cuáles eran sus impresiones, con toda seguridad las encontraría en el *Interviewer*. Sin la menor duda, esta vez Henrietta iba a ver desde dentro la vida del país.

—¿Eres consciente de hacia dónde te estás dejando arrastrar, Henrietta Stackpole? —preguntó Isabel, imitando el tono utilizado por su amiga la noche anterior.

—Me estoy dejando arrastrar hacia una gran posición: la de reina del periodismo estadounidense. Si mi próxima crónica no aparece reproducida por todo el país, me trago el limpiaplumas.

Henrietta había quedado con su amiga, la señorita Annie Climber, la misma joven que había sido objeto de tantas proposiciones en el continente, para ir a hacer algunas compras con las que la señorita Climber se despediría de un hemisferio en el que, por lo menos, se había sentido apreciada; así pues, se dirigió a Jermyn Street para recoger a su

acompañante. Poco después de su partida, le anunciaron la llegada de Ralph Touchett, y, nada más verlo, Isabel se dio cuenta de que algo le preocupaba. El joven no tardó en hacerle partícipe de sus confidencias. Había recibido un telegrama de su madre en el que le comunicaba que su padre había sufrido un fuerte ataque de su vieja enfermedad, que estaba muy alarmada y que le suplicaba que regresase de inmediato a Gardencourt. En esta ocasión, al menos, la afición de la señora Touchett a la telegrafía no podía ser objeto de ningún reproche.

—He pensado que sería mejor ir antes a ver al eminente doctor sir Mathew Hope —dijo Ralph—, que para mi inmensa suerte se encuentra en la ciudad. Me recibirá a las doce y media, y me aseguraré de que vaya a Gardencourt, cosa que imagino que estará dispuesto a hacer, puesto que ya ha visto a mi padre en varias ocasiones, tanto allí como en Londres. Hay un expreso a las tres menos cuarto, que es el que voy a tomar; y tú puedes regresar conmigo o quedarte aquí unos cuantos días más, lo que prefieras.

—Me iré contigo, desde luego —repuso Isabel—. No creo que le sea de gran utilidad a mi tío, pero si se encuentra mal, quiero estar cerca de él.

—Creo que le tienes cariño —dijo Ralph con cierta expresión de tímido placer en el rostro—. Tú sabes valorarlo, cosa que no todo el mundo hace. Sus cualidades son demasiado sutiles.

—Más bien lo adoro —dijo Isabel tras una breve pausa.

—Eso está muy bien. Después de su hijo, es tu más rendido admirador.

Isabel recibió el comentario con agrado, aunque en su interior suspiró de alivio al pensar que el señor Touchett era uno de esos admiradores que no podía proponerle matrimonio. Sin embargo, no fue de eso de lo que habló: pasó a informar a Ralph de que había otras razones para no quedarse en Londres. Estaba cansada de la ciudad y deseaba abandonarla; y, además, Henrietta pensaba irse una temporada a Bedfordshire.

—¿A Bedfordshire?

—Sí, con lady Pensil, la hermana del señor Bantling, quien le ha prometido conseguirle una invitación.

Aunque Ralph era presa de la angustia, al oír aquellas palabras soltó una fuerte carcajada. Sin embargo, recobró al instante la seriedad.

—Bantling es un hombre con mucho valor. Pero ¿qué pasaría si la invitación se perdiese por el camino?

—Tenía entendido que el servicio de correos británico era impecable.

—Hasta el bueno de Homero echa una cabezada de vez en cuando —dijo Ralph—. Sin embargo —añadió con más entusiasmo—, el bueno de Bantling no lo hace jamás, y, pase lo que pase, él se hará cargo de Henrietta.

Ralph se marchó a su cita con sir Matthew Hope, e Isabel hizo los preparativos para abandonar el hotel Pratt. El peligro que corría su tío la afectaba profundamente, y mientras se encontraba ante el baúl abierto y miraba ausente a su alrededor buscando qué guardar en él, los ojos se le inundaron de repente de lágrimas. Tal vez fuese esa la razón de que, cuando a las dos regresó Ralph para llevarla a la estación, ella no estuviese aún lista. El joven, sin embargo, se encontró en el saloncito a la señorita Stackpole, que acababa de llegar de almorzar y que se apresuró a expresarle su pesar por la enfermedad de su padre.

—Es un gran hombre —dijo—, fiel hasta el final. Si es que es realmente el final… perdone que lo mencione, pero a menudo ha debido de pensar usted en tal posibilidad. Siento mucho no poder estar en Gardencourt.

—Se divertirá mucho más en Bedfordshire.

—Estaré demasiado triste para divertirme en un momento así —dijo Henrietta con mucha delicadeza. Aunque a renglón seguido añadió—: Me gustaría tanto dar cumplida fe de sus últimos momentos.

—Mi padre podría aún vivir mucho tiempo —se limitó a decir Ralph.

Y, a continuación, pasando a asuntos más alegres, se puso a interrogar a la señorita Stackpole sobre su futuro inmediato.

Ahora que Ralph tenía problemas, Henrietta empleó con él un tono mucho más generoso y le dijo que se sentía muy en deuda con él por haberle presentado al señor Bantling.

—Me ha contado las cosas que quiero saber —dijo—, todos los comadreos sociales y todo lo relativo a la familia real. No acabo de estar convencida de que todo lo que me cuenta de la familia real hable mucho en favor de esta, pero él me asegura que eso se debe únicamente a la peculiar forma que tengo de ver las cosas. En fin, yo lo único que quiero es que me relate los hechos y, una vez que los conozca, ya sabré yo interpretarlos con la prontitud necesaria.

Y añadió que el señor Bantling había tenido la bondad de prometerle que iría a buscarla esa tarde para acompañarla.

—¿Para acompañarla adónde? —se aventuró a preguntar Ralph.

—Al palacio de Buckingham. Me lo va a enseñar a fondo, para que pueda hacerme una idea de cómo es la vida en él.

—Ah —dijo Ralph—, la dejamos en buenas manos. Lo siguiente será enterarnos de que la han invitado al castillo de Windsor.

—Si me lo piden, por supuesto que iré. Una vez que empiezo, no tengo miedo de nada. Pero, pese a todo —añadió Henrietta tras un momento—, no estoy contenta, no me siento tranquila con respecto a Isabel.

—¿Cuál ha sido su última fechoría?

—Bueno, como ya le he hablado de esto antes, supongo que no habrá problema si lo hago de nuevo. Yo siempre acabo lo que empiezo. El señor Goodwood estuvo aquí anoche.

Ralph abrió asombrado los ojos; llegó incluso a ruborizarse un poco, un rubor que era muestra de una cierta e intensa emoción. Recordó que Isabel, al separarse de él en Winchester Square, le había negado que el motivo de hacerlo fuese que esperaba recibir una visita en el hotel Pratt, y la sospecha de que lo hubiese engañado le produjo una nueva punzada de dolor. Por otro lado, se dijo de inmediato para sus adentros, ¿por qué motivo tendría que importarle que ella hubiese concertado una cita con un enamorado? ¿Acaso no se había considerado desde siempre una muestra de gracia y encanto que las jóvenes rodeasen de misterio tales encuentros? Ralph respondió con diplomacia a la señorita Stackpole.

—Yo habría pensado que, dadas las opiniones que usted me expresó el otro día, eso la habría llenado de satisfacción.

—¿Que él viniera a verla? Eso salió bien, tal como estaban las cosas. Fue una pequeña artimaña mía; le hice saber que estábamos en Londres y, cuando supe que esa noche saldría a cenar, le hice llegar unas palabras… las que se dirigen a alguien que sabe de qué va el asunto. Le dije que esperaba que la encontrase sola. No voy a negarle que tenía asimismo la esperanza de que usted no apareciese por aquí. Y él vino a verla, pero más le habría valido no haberlo hecho.

—¿Es que Isabel se mostró cruel?

Y el rostro de Ralph se iluminó con el alivio de saber que su prima no lo había engañado.

—No sé con exactitud qué pasó entre ellos. Pero ella no le dio satisfacción alguna: lo mandó de vuelta a Estados Unidos.

—¡Pobre señor Goodwood! —dijo Ralph con un suspiro.

—Por lo que parece, lo único que Isabel quiere es librarse de él —añadió Henrietta.

—¡Pobre señor Goodwood! —repitió Ralph.

La exclamación, no queda más remedio que reconocerlo, fue algo automático y no expresaba con exactitud los pensamientos del joven, que empezaban a ir por otro camino.

—Eso no lo ha dicho como si de verdad lo sintiese. No me creo que le importe.

—Bueno —dijo Ralph—, no debe usted olvidar que yo no conozco a ese joven tan interesante, que nunca lo he visto.

—Pues yo sí que voy a verlo, y voy a decirle que no abandone. Si no creyese que Isabel acabará por dejarse convencer —añadió la señorita Stackpole—, sería yo la que abandonaría. Es decir, prescindiría de ella.

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Ralph imaginó que, dadas las circunstancias, la despedida entre Isabel y su amiga podría resultar un tanto embarazosa, y bajó a la entrada del hotel sin esperar a su prima, quien, tras una breve demora, apareció con huellas en los ojos, o así lo creyó él, de reproches no aceptados. Los dos hicieron el viaje hasta Gardencourt en un silencio apenas interrumpido, y el criado que los recibió en la estación no tenía mejores noticias que darles acerca del señor Touchett, razón por la que Ralph se congratuló de nuevo por la promesa obtenida de sir Matthew Hope de que tomaría el tren de las cinco y se quedaría a pasar la noche. Al llegar a casa, se enteró de que la señora Touchett no se había separado prácticamente del anciano y de que en ese momento se encontraba con él. Ese hecho hizo que Ralph se dijese para sus adentros que, después de todo, lo que a su madre le habían faltado eran ocasiones propicias. Las naturalezas más preclaras eran aquellas que brillaban con luz propia en los momentos cruciales. Isabel se dirigió a sus aposentos y notó en toda la casa ese marcado silencio que precede a una crisis. Una hora más tarde, sin embargo, bajó en busca de su tía, a la que quería preguntarle por el señor Touchett. Miró en la biblioteca, pero la señora Touchett no se encontraba allí, y dado que el tiempo, que había sido frío y húmedo, se había estropeado ahora por completo, no era probable que hubiera salido a dar su paseo habitual por los jardines. Isabel estaba a punto de hacer sonar la campanilla para enviar recado a los aposentos de la dama cuando tal propósito se esfumó ante un sonido inesperado: el de una música queda que parecía provenir del salón. Sabía que su tía jamás se acercaba al piano, por lo que lo más probable era que el músico fuese Ralph, que tocaba para distraerse. Que en aquel momento hubiese recurrido a un pasatiempo así parecía indicar que la preocupación por el estado de su padre había disminuido; de modo que la joven, con buen humor casi renovado, se encaminó hacia el lugar de donde procedía la música. El salón de Gardencourt era una estancia de grandes dimensiones, y, al hallarse el instrumento situado en el extremo más alejado de la puerta por la que entró, su llegada pasó inadvertida para la persona sentada al piano. Esa persona no era ni Ralph ni su madre: era una dama desconocida para ella, circunstancia que advirtió de inmediato, pese a que la pianista estaba de espaldas a la puerta. Isabel, presa de la sorpresa, contempló un momento aquella espalda ancha y elegantemente vestida. La dama, estaba claro, era una visita que había llegado durante su ausencia y a la que ninguno de los dos sirvientes con los que había hablado desde su regreso, uno de ellos la doncella de su tía, había hecho mención. Isabel, sin embargo, ya había aprendido de cuánta discreción podía ir acompañada la función de recibir órdenes, y era particularmente consciente de la sequedad con que la había tratado la doncella de su tía, entre cuyas manos se había deslizado tal vez con excesiva desconfianza y con aires de poseer un plumaje demasiado lustroso. La llegada de un visitante no era en sí nada desconcertante; ella todavía no se había despojado de la juvenil creencia de que todo nuevo conocido puede resultar una influencia decisiva en la vida. Tras hacerse esas reflexiones, se dio cuenta de que la dama que estaba al piano tocaba extraordinariamente bien. Estaba tocando una pieza de Schubert, Isabel no sabía cuál pero reconoció al compositor, y la interpretación que hacía era muy personal, tocaba como una artista. Isabel se sentó sin hacer ruido en el asiento más próximo y esperó a que la pieza llegase a su fin. Una vez terminada, experimentó un irresistible deseo de darle las gracias a la intérprete, y se levantó del asiento para hacerlo, al mismo tiempo que la desconocida se giraba con rapidez, como si acabase de advertir su presencia.

—Esa pieza es muy bella, y su interpretación la embellece todavía más —dijo Isabel con todo el entusiasmo juvenil con el que normalmente entonaba una alabanza sincera.

—¿No cree entonces que pueda haber molestado al señor Touchett? —respondió la pianista con toda la dulzura que un elogio así merecía—. Esta casa es tan grande y sus aposentos están tan lejos que me pareció que podría arriesgarme, sobre todo si tocaba solo… solo *du bout des doigts*.

«Es francesa —se dijo Isabel para sus adentros—. Habla como si lo fuera.» Y esa hipótesis hizo que la dama resultase aún más interesante a ojos de nuestra curiosa heroína.

—Espero que mi tío se encuentre bien —añadió Isabel—. Creo que escuchar una música tan hermosa como esa tendría que hacerle sentirse mejor.

La dama sonrió pero no se mostró de acuerdo.

—Mucho me temo que haya momentos en la vida en los que ni siquiera Schubert nos diga nada. Sin embargo,

debemos reconocerlo, son esos nuestros peores momentos.

—En tal caso, yo no me encuentro en uno de ellos —dijo Isabel—. Muy al contrario, me llenaría de alegría que tocase usted un poco más.

—Si eso la complace, lo haré encantada.

Y la complaciente persona se sentó de nuevo al piano e hizo sonar unos cuantos acordes, mientras Isabel tomaba asiento más cerca del instrumento. De repente, la recién llegada se detuvo sin levantar las manos del teclado, y se volvió a medias hasta mirar por encima del hombro. Tenía unos cuarenta años y no era bonita, aunque su expresión resultaba encantadora.

—Disculpe, pero ¿no es usted la sobrina… la joven estadounidense?

—Sí, soy la sobrina de la señora Touchett —respondió Isabel con sencillez.

La dama del piano se quedó inmóvil un rato más, y le dirigió una mirada llena de interés por encima del hombro.

—Está muy bien; somos compatriotas.

Y a continuación empezó a tocar de nuevo.

«Así que no es francesa», murmuró para sí Isabel; y como su hipótesis anterior la había revestido de un aire romántico, podría haberse supuesto que esta nueva revelación le provocase desencanto. Pero no fue así, pues el hecho de que una dama tan interesante fuese estadounidense parecía más singular que si hubiese sido francesa.

La dama tocaba igual que lo había hecho antes, con suavidad y solemnidad, y mientras lo hacía, la oscuridad aumentó en la estancia. Las sombras crepusculares del otoño la invadieron, y desde donde se encontraba Isabel vio cómo la lluvia, que caía ahora con fuerza, anegaba el frío césped y cómo el viento sacudía los frondosos árboles. Por fin, cuando acabó de tocar, su acompañante se levantó y se le acercó sonriente, antes de que Isabel tuviese tiempo de darle de nuevo las gracias.

—No sabe cuánto me alegro de que haya vuelto —dijo—; he oído hablar tanto de usted.

Isabel pensó que era una persona muy agradable, pero aun así habló con cierta brusquedad al responder a esas palabras.

—¿Quién le ha hablado de mí?

La desconocida vaciló tan solo un instante, y después respondió:

—Su tío. Llevo tres días aquí, y el primer día me permitió que fuese a hacerle una visita a su habitación y me estuvo hablando todo el tiempo de usted.

—Teniendo en cuenta que no me conocía, debió usted de aburrirse bastante.

—Lo que me entraron fueron ganas de conocerla. Sobre todo porque desde entonces, al pasar su tía tanto tiempo con el señor Touchett, he estado muy sola y he acabado bastante aburrida de mi propia compañía. No he escogido un buen momento para venir de visita.

Había entrado un criado con las lámparas, seguido por otro que portaba la bandeja del té. Al parecer, habían informado a la señora Touchett de que se iba a servir dicho refrigerio, ya que apareció en ese momento y se dirigió sin más a la tetera. No hubo prácticamente diferencia alguna entre el saludo que dirigió a su sobrina y el gesto con que levantó la tapa del recipiente para echar una ojeada a su contenido: en ninguno de los dos casos habría sido apropiado mostrar excesiva vehemencia. Al preguntarle por su marido, no pudo responder que se encontrase mejor; pero el médico local estaba ahora con él, y tenían muchas esperanzas en que la consulta de dicho caballero con sir Matthew Hope sirviese para despejar dudas.

—Imagino que ustedes dos ya se habrán presentado —prosiguió la señora Touchett—. Si no ha sido así, les recomiendo que lo hagan, ya que mientras Ralph y yo sigamos junto a la cabecera del señor Touchett, es probable que no disfruten de más compañía que la mutua.

—No sé nada de usted, aparte de que es una gran pianista —dijo Isabel a la visitante.

—Hay muchísimas más cosas que saber de ella —dijo la señora Touchett con aquel tono suyo un tanto seco.

—Estoy segura de que hay muy poco de mí que pueda interesarle a la señorita Archer —dijo la dama con una leve carcajada—. Soy una vieja amiga de su tía. He vivido mucho tiempo en Florencia. Soy madame Merle.

Hizo este último anuncio como si estuviese refiriéndose a una persona cuya identidad fuese bastante conocida. Sin embargo, a Isabel aquel nombre le decía más bien poco; pero lo que sí seguía pensando era que madame Merle era la persona de modales más encantadores que había conocido en su vida.

—Pese a su nombre, no es extranjera —dijo la señora Touchett—. Nació en… siempre se me olvida dónde nació usted.

—Pues entonces no merece la pena que se lo diga.

—Todo lo contrario —dijo la señora Touchett, a quien rara vez se le escapaba algo que no respondiera a la lógica —; si yo lo recordase, entonces sí que resultaría completamente superfluo.

Madame Merle miró a Isabel con una sonrisa cosmopolita, del tipo que traspasa fronteras.

—Nací a la sombra de nuestra enseña nacional.

—Le gusta demasiado el misterio —dijo la señora Touchett—, ese es su gran defecto.

—Ah —exclamó madame Merle—, yo tengo grandes defectos, pero no creo que ese sea uno de ellos; ciertamente no es el peor. Vine al mundo en el astillero naval de Brooklyn. Mi padre era un oficial de alta graduación de la Marina de Estados Unidos, y por aquel entonces disfrutaba de un cargo, de un cargo de mucha responsabilidad, en dichas instalaciones. Supongo que el mar tendría que encantarme, pero lo odio. Por eso no regreso a Estados Unidos. Adoro la tierra firme; lo que de verdad importa es amar algo.

Isabel, como testigo imparcial, no se sentía muy convencida por la descripción que la señora Touchett había hecho de su visitante, quien poseía un rostro expresivo, comunicativo y franco que no respondía en absoluto a la idea que ella tenía del de una persona con tendencia al secretismo. Era un rostro que traslucía un espíritu abierto y unas emociones prontas y espontáneas y que, pese a no ser poseedor de una belleza clásica, resultaba de lo más atractivo y encantador. Madame Merle era una mujer alta, rubia y bien proporcionada; toda su persona era curva y rotunda, si bien carente de esas acumulaciones que denotan pesadez. Sus rasgos eran marcados, pero guardaban perfecta proporción y armonía, y su tez era clara y saludable. Los ojos grises eran pequeños, pero llenos de luz e incapaces de expresar estupidez; incapaces, según algunos, hasta de derramar lágrimas. La boca era grande y bien dibujada y, al sonreír, la comisura izquierda se curvaba hacia arriba de una forma que a la mayoría de la gente le parecía extraña, a otros muy afectada, y a unos cuantos llena de gracia. Isabel se inclinaba a incluirse en esta última categoría. El cabello de madame Merle era rubio y espeso y lo llevaba recogido a la manera clásica, pensó Isabel, como si de un busto de Juno o Niobe se tratase; y las manos eran grandes y blancas, de una forma perfecta, tan perfecta que su propietaria prefería dejarlas sin adornos y no llevaba sortija alguna. Isabel, como hemos visto, la había tomado al principio por francesa; pero una observación más detenida podría haberla clasificado como alemana, alemana de clase noble, o tal vez austríaca, baronesa, condesa, incluso princesa. Nadie habría imaginado jamás que hubiese venido al mundo en Brooklyn, aunque sin duda tampoco nadie habría podido argumentar que aquel aire de distinción tan marcado que la rodeaba fuese incompatible con su lugar de nacimiento. Era verdad que la bandera nacional había ondeado de buen principio sobre su cuna y tal vez la brisa de libertad que agitaba las barras y estrellas hubiese conformado la actitud que desde entonces había adoptado frente a la vida. Y, sin embargo, era evidente que no tenía nada en común con un trozo de tela sacudido y agitado por el viento: sus maneras evidenciaban la calma y la confianza que se adquiere tras una larga experiencia. No obstante, la experiencia no había marchitado su juventud; simplemente le había hecho ganar tolerancia y comprensión. Era, en resumen, una mujer que mantenía perfectamente a raya sus fuertes impulsos, lo que a ojos de Isabel resultaba una combinación ideal.

La joven se hacía estas reflexiones mientras las tres estaban sentadas tomando el té, pero dicha ceremonia se vio pronto interrumpida por la llegada de Londres del eminente doctor, al que de inmediato hicieron entrar al salón. La señora Touchett lo condujo a la biblioteca para tener con él una conversación en privado; y, a continuación, madame Merle e Isabel se despidieron hasta la hora de cenar. La perspectiva de contar de nuevo con la compañía de aquella mujer tan interesante mitigó sobremanera la sensación de tristeza que, a ojos de Isabel, se estaba adueñando de Gardencourt.

Cuando la joven entró en el salón antes de cenar, se encontró el lugar desierto, pero al cabo de un momento apareció Ralph. La ansiedad por su padre se había calmado un tanto; la opinión de sir Matthew Hope sobre el estado del anciano era menos pesimista que la que él había albergado. La recomendación del médico era que estuviese con él únicamente la enfermera durante las tres o cuatro próximas horas; así que Ralph, su madre y el propio galeno podrían ir a cenar al comedor. Llegaron, pues, la señora Touchett y sir Matthew; madame Merle fue la última en aparecer.

Antes de la llegada de la dama, Isabel habló de ella con Ralph, quien se encontraba delante de la chimenea.

—Por favor, dime, ¿quién es esta madame Merle?

—La mujer más inteligente que conozco, sin exceptuarte a ti —respondió Ralph.

—Me pareció muy agradable.

—Estaba seguro de que te parecería muy agradable.

—¿Fue esa la razón de que la invitases?

—No fui yo quien la invitó, y cuando regresamos de Londres no sabía que se encontraba aquí. No la invitó nadie. Es amiga de mi madre y, justo después de que tú y yo nos fuésemos a la ciudad, mi madre recibió una nota de ella. Acababa de llegar a Inglaterra (normalmente vive en el extranjero, aunque entre una cosa y otra pasa largas temporadas en el país), y solicitaba su permiso para pasar aquí unos cuantos días. Es una mujer que puede hacer propuestas así con total confianza, ya que es bien recibida allá donde vaya. Y, tratándose de mi madre, tendría todavía menos razones para dudarlo: es la única persona del mundo que mi madre admira sin reservas. De no ser quién es (que, después de todo, es lo que mi madre prefiere con mucho), le gustaría ser madame Merle. Y menudo cambio sería ese.

—Pues es realmente encantadora —dijo Isabel—. Y toca de maravilla.

—Lo hace todo de maravilla. Es completa.

Isabel miró a su primo un instante.

—A ti no te gusta.

—Todo lo contrario, hace tiempo estuve enamorado de ella.

—Y ella no te hizo caso, y por eso no te gusta.

—¿Cómo podríamos haber hablado de esas cosas? En aquel entonces, aún vivía monsieur Merle.

—¿Y ahora está muerto?

—Eso dice ella.

—¿Y tú no la crees?

—Sí, porque tal afirmación concuerda con todas las probabilidades. Es probable que el marido de madame Merle muriera.

Isabel miró de nuevo a su primo.

—No sé qué me estás queriendo decir. Quieres decir algo… y no lo dices. ¿Quién era monsieur Merle?

—El marido de madame.

—Eres ciertamente odioso. ¿Tiene hijos?

—Ni uno solo… por fortuna.

—¿Por fortuna?

—Quiero decir por fortuna para el hijo. Está claro que ella lo habría malcriado.

Isabel parecía a punto de decirle a su primo lo odioso que era por tercera vez; pero la conversación se vio interrumpida por la llegada de la dama sobre la que estaban hablando. Entró apresuradamente, entre un frufrú de telas, disculpándose por llegar tarde y abrochándose un brazalete, con un vestido de satén azul oscuro que dejaba ver un escote blanco apenas cubierto por un curioso collar de plata. Ralph le ofreció el brazo con la exagerada premura de un hombre que ha dejado de estar enamorado.

Incluso de haberse encontrado en dicho caso, Ralph tenía otras cosas en las que pensar. El eminente doctor pasó la noche en Gardencourt y, antes de regresar por la mañana a Londres, tras una nueva consulta con el médico de cabecera del señor Touchett, accedió al deseo de Ralph de volver al día siguiente para examinar de nuevo al paciente. Al cabo de un día sir Matthew Hope regresó a Gardencourt, pero esta vez su opinión sobre el estado del anciano, quien había empeorado en el transcurso de aquellas veinticuatro horas, resultó mucho menos alentadora. Su debilidad era extrema, y su hijo, que no se apartaba ni un momento de la cabecera de la cama, tenía a menudo el convencimiento de que el fin estaba próximo. El médico local, hombre muy sagaz y en el que Ralph tenía secretamente más confianza que en su distinguido colega, atendía constantemente al enfermo, y sir Matthew Hope volvió a visitarlo varias veces. El señor Touchett pasaba gran parte del tiempo inconsciente; dormía mucho y apenas hablaba. Isabel tenía un gran deseo de serle útil y se le permitía velarlo durante las horas en las que el resto de los cuidadores (entre los que la señora Touchett no era la menos asidua) se iban a descansar. Su tío no daba nunca muestras de reconocerla, e Isabel se decía para sus adentros: «Y si se muere mientras estoy yo aquí sentada…», y la idea la mantenía despierta y en tensión. En cierta ocasión, el señor Touchett abrió los ojos un instante y los posó en ella con mirada inteligente, pero cuando la joven se le acercó, con la esperanza de que la hubiese reconocido, los cerró y cayó de nuevo en el letargo. Al día siguiente, sin embargo, revivió durante un tiempo más prolongado; pero en esta ocasión Ralph era el único que se encontraba a su lado. El anciano empezó a hablar, para gran satisfacción de su hijo, quien le aseguró que pronto lo verían sentado de nuevo.

—No, hijo mío —dijo el señor Touchett—, no a menos que me enterréis sentado, como hacían algunos pueblos en

la antigüedad… ¿Era en la antigüedad?

—Venga, papá, no digas esas cosas —murmuró Ralph—. No puedes negar que estás mejorando.

—Si no lo dices, no tendré necesidad de negarlo —respondió el anciano—. ¿Por qué íbamos a andarnos con engaños justo al final? Hasta ahora, jamás nos hemos engañado. En algún momento tengo que morirme, y es mejor morirse cuando uno está enfermo que cuando se encuentra bien. Estoy muy enfermo, más enfermo de lo que lo estaré jamás. Espero que no te empeñes en demostrar que puedo estar aún peor. Eso sería espantoso. No vas a hacerlo, ¿verdad? Pues mejor así.

Tras haber dejado tan clara su opinión, se quedó en silencio; pero en la siguiente ocasión en que Ralph se encontraba con él, volvió a animarse a conversar. La enfermera se había ido a cenar y Ralph estaba solo a su cargo, tras haber sustituido hacía un momento a la señora Touchett, quien había estado de guardia desde que habían terminado de cenar. La estancia estaba iluminada únicamente por las llamas parpadeantes de la chimenea, que últimamente era necesario tener encendida, y la larga sombra de Ralph, proyectada sobre la pared y el techo, variaba constantemente de forma sin dejar de resultar grotesca.

—¿Quién está conmigo… es mi hijo? —preguntó el anciano.

—Sí, es tu hijo, papá.

—¿Y no hay nadie más?

—Nadie más.

El señor Touchett estuvo un rato en silencio, y a continuación añadió:

—Quiero que hablemos un poco.

—¿No te resultará cansado? —objetó Ralph.

—No importa si es así. Voy a tener mucho tiempo para descansar. Quiero que hablemos de ti.

Ralph se acercó a la cama, tomó asiento, cubrió con la suya la mano de su padre y se inclinó hacia él.

—Más valdría que escogieses un tema más interesante.

—Tú has sido siempre interesante; yo siempre me he sentido orgulloso de tu inteligencia. Me gustaría tanto pensar que vas a hacer algo…

—Si nos dejas —dijo Ralph—, lo único que haré será echarte de menos.

—Eso es precisamente lo que no quiero, y es justo de lo que quiero hablar. Tienes que buscarte algo nuevo que te interese.

—Yo no necesito ningún interés nuevo, papá. Tengo más que suficiente con los de siempre.

El anciano se quedó mirando a su hijo; su rostro era el de un moribundo, pero sus ojos eran los del Daniel Touchett de siempre. Parecía estar calibrando los intereses de Ralph.

—Naturalmente, tienes a tu madre —dijo al fin—. Y te encargarás de cuidar de ella.

—Mi madre siempre cuida de sí misma —respondió Ralph.

—Ya —dijo su padre—, pero tal vez necesite algo de ayuda a medida que se haga mayor.

—Eso no lo verán mis ojos. Será ella la que me entierre a mí.

—Es muy probable que así sea; ¡pero esa no es razón para…!

El señor Touchett dejó la frase sin acabar, exhaló un suspiro de impotencia que no fue del todo quejumbroso y volvió a sumirse en el silencio.

—No te preocupes por nosotros —dijo su hijo—. Ya sabes que mi madre y yo nos llevamos muy bien.

—Os lleváis bien gracias a estar siempre separados. No es natural.

—Si tú nos dejas, lo más probable es que nos veamos con mayor frecuencia.

—Bueno —observó el anciano con una vaga irrelevancia—. No se puede decir que mi muerte vaya a suponer mucho cambio en la vida de tu madre.

—Probablemente suponga más cambio del que imaginas.

—Ya que tendrá más dinero —dijo el señor Touchett—. Le dejo una gran parte de la herencia, como corresponde a toda buena esposa, igual que si lo hubiera sido.

—Según sus teorías, sí que ha sido una buena esposa, papá. Jamás te ha causado ningún problema.

—Ay, algunos problemas son muy agradables —murmuró el señor Touchett—. Los que tú me has causado, por ejemplo. Pero tu madre ha estado menos… menos… ¿cómo lo diría?, menos ausente desde que estoy enfermo. Imagino que sabe que lo he notado.

—Yo me aseguraré de que lo sepa. No sabes cuánto me alegra que lo menciones.

—Para ella no supondrá nada; no lo hace por complacerme a mí. Lo hace por complacer… por complacer… —Y se quedó un rato tratando de decidir el motivo—. Lo hace porque le apetece. Pero no es de eso de lo que quiero hablar —añadió—. Es de ti. Vas a quedarte en una situación muy acomodada.

—Sí —dijo Ralph—, ya lo sé. Pero espero que no hayas olvidado la conversación que tuvimos hace un año, cuando te dije exactamente cuánto dinero iba a necesitar y te rogué que hicieses mejor uso del resto.

—Sí, sí, lo recuerdo. A los pocos días, hice un nuevo testamento. Imagino que es la primera vez que sucede algo así: que un joven intenta que se haga un testamento que vaya en su contra.

—No va en mi contra —dijo Ralph—. Lo que sí iría en mi contra sería contar con enormes propiedades de las que ocuparme. Es imposible que un hombre en mi estado de salud gaste mucho dinero, y con el necesario basta y sobra.

—Bien, pues tendrás el necesario… y un poco más. Habrá de sobra para más de uno… habrá suficiente para dos.

—Eso es demasiado —dijo Ralph.

—Ah, no digas eso. Lo mejor que puedes hacer, cuando yo no esté, será casarte.

Ralph había adivinado adónde quería ir a parar su padre, y además aquella recomendación no era ninguna novedad. Hacía ya tiempo que al señor Touchett le resultaba la forma más ingeniosa de contemplar con optimismo la cuestión de la longevidad de su hijo. Normalmente, Ralph se lo tomaba a broma, pero las presentes circunstancias prohibían el empleo del humor. Se limitó a reclinarse en la silla y devolvió la mirada suplicante de su padre.

—Si yo, con una mujer que no me ha tenido excesivo afecto, he tenido una vida muy feliz —dijo el anciano, llevando aún más lejos la idea—, qué vida podrías tener tú si te casaras con alguien distinto a la señora Touchett. Y hay más mujeres distintas a ella que parecidas. —Ralph seguía sin decir nada y, tras una pausa, su padre continuó con voz suave—: ¿Qué piensas de tu prima?

Al oírlo, Ralph se sobresaltó y respondió con sonrisa forzada a la pregunta.

—Si no he entendido mal, ¿me estás proponiendo que me case con Isabel?

—Bueno, de eso es de lo que se trata. ¿Es que no te gusta Isabel?

—Claro que sí, muchísimo. —Y Ralph se levantó de la silla y se acercó a la chimenea. Se detuvo un instante ante ella, y a continuación se inclinó y avivó el fuego de forma mecánica—. Isabel me gusta muchísimo —repitió.

—Pues —dijo su padre—, yo sé que a ella le gustas. Me ha dicho cuánto le gustas.

—¿Y te comentó que quería casarse conmigo?

—No, pero es imposible que tenga nada en tu contra. Y es la joven más encantadora que he conocido jamás. Y sería buena para ti. He meditado mucho sobre este asunto.

—Yo también —dijo Ralph, acercándose de nuevo a la cabecera de la cama—. No me importa que lo sepas.

—Entonces, ¿estás enamorado de Isabel? A mí me parece que así es. Es como si ella hubiese venido aquí con ese fin.

—No, no estoy enamorado de ella; pero lo estaría si… si algunas cosas fuesen distintas.

—Ay, las cosas siempre son distintas de lo que podrían ser —dijo el anciano—. Si esperas a que cambien, nunca harás nada. No sé si estás enterado —añadió—, pero supongo que no hago ningún daño si lo saco a colación en un momento como este: el otro día hubo alguien que propuso matrimonio a Isabel, y ella lo rechazó.

—Sé que rechazó a Warburton: me lo contó él.

—Pues bien, eso demuestra que existen posibilidades para alguien más.

—Hubo alguien más que lo intentó el otro día en Londres, pero no consiguió nada.

—¿Fuiste tú? —preguntó ansioso el señor Touchett.

—No, fue un antiguo amigo suyo; un pobre caballero que vino desde Estados Unidos con ese único propósito.

—Bueno, fuese quien fuese, lo siento por él. Pero eso únicamente demuestra lo que te estoy diciendo: que tienes el camino despejado.

—Si eso es cierto, querido padre, resulta si cabe aún más triste que yo esté incapacitado para recorrer ese camino. No creo en muchas cosas, pero tengo tres o cuatro convicciones muy arraigadas. Una es que, en general, los primos no deberían casarse entre sí. Y otra es que las personas con una enfermedad pulmonar en fase avanzada no deberían casarse y punto.

El anciano alzó una mano débil y la movió de un lado a otro frente a su rostro.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso? Tienes una forma de ver las cosas que hace que todo parezca mal. ¿Qué clase de prima es una a la que no habías visto nunca en sus más de veinte años de vida? Todos somos primos entre nosotros, y si hiciésemos caso de eso, la raza humana se extinguiría. Y lo mismo sucede con tu enfermedad pulmonar. Estás

mucho mejor de lo que solías. Lo único que necesitas es llevar una vida natural. Y es muchísimo más natural casarse con una joven de la que se está enamorado que quedarse soltero por unos principios falsos.

—Yo no estoy enamorado de Isabel —dijo Ralph.

—Acabas de decirme que sí que lo estarías si no pensases que eso estaba mal. Yo lo que quiero es demostrarte que no tiene nada de malo.

—Lo único que vas a conseguir es agotarte, querido papá —dijo Ralph maravillado de la tenacidad de su padre y de que sacase fuerzas para insistir—. Y en ese caso, ¿qué será de todos nosotros?

—¿Qué será de ti si yo no me ocupo de arreglar las cosas? No quieres saber nada del banco, y tampoco me tendrás a mí para encargarme de él. Dices que tienes muchos intereses, pero yo no los veo por ningún lado.

Ralph se recostó en el asiento con los brazos cruzados y meditó durante un tiempo con la mirada fija. Por fin, dijo con aire de alguien que ha reunido el valor suficiente:

—Tengo mucho interés en mi prima, pero no de la clase que tú desearías. No voy a vivir muchos años, pero espero vivir el tiempo suficiente para ver qué hace con su vida. Isabel es completamente independiente de mí, y es muy poca la influencia que yo puedo ejercer en su vida. Pero me gustaría hacer algo por ella.

—¿Qué es lo que te gustaría hacer?

—Me gustaría ayudarla a desplegar las alas.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso?

—Que me gustaría darle la oportunidad de hacer algunas de las cosas que ella quiere. Quiere ver mundo, por ejemplo. Pues me gustaría meter dinero en su bolso.

—Ah, me alegra que hayas pensado en eso —dijo el anciano—, pero yo también lo he hecho. Le dejo un legado de cinco mil libras.

—Eso es fantástico, es muy generoso de tu parte. Pero me gustaría hacer todavía más.

El rastro de aquella astucia velada con la que Daniel Touchett había respondido toda la vida al oír una propuesta financiera se reflejaba todavía en su rostro, en el que el enfermo no había conseguido borrar por completo al hombre de negocios.

—Estaré encantado de estudiar la propuesta —dijo con dulzura.

—Pues bien, Isabel es pobre. Mi madre dice que cuenta apenas con unos pocos cientos de dólares al año. A mí me gustaría hacerla rica.

—¿Qué entiendes tú por rica?

—Para mí la gente es rica cuando cuenta con la posibilidad de satisfacer las exigencias de su imaginación, e Isabel cuenta con una gran imaginación.

—Y tú también, hijo mío —dijo el señor Touchett, quien lo escuchaba con mucha atención, si bien un tanto confundido.

—Dices que yo tendré dinero suficiente para dos. Lo que yo quiero es que tengas la bondad de librarme del superfluo y se lo dejes a Isabel. Que dividas mi herencia en dos partes iguales y le des la otra a ella.

—¿Para que haga con ella lo que le apetezca?

—Exactamente lo que le apetezca.

—¿Y sin ninguna contrapartida?

—¿Qué contrapartida podría haber?

—La que ya he mencionado.

—¿Que ella se case… con este o con aquel? Si te hago esta propuesta es precisamente para librarla de ese tipo de cosas. Si cuenta con ingresos suficientes, nunca se verá obligada a casarse para que la mantengan. Eso es lo que yo quiero astutamente evitar. Ella desea ser libre, y tu herencia le dará la libertad.

—Bien, por lo que parece lo has pensado a fondo —dijo el señor Touchett—. Pero no veo por qué recurres a mí. El dinero será tuyo, y te puedes encargar tú de dárselo sin problemas.

Ralph lo miró boquiabierto.

—Por Dios, querido padre, yo no puedo ofrecerle dinero a Isabel.

El anciano exhaló un gemido.

—¡No me digas que no estás enamorado de ella! ¿Quieres que todo el mérito recaiga sobre mí?

—Por completo. Quiero que sea simplemente una cláusula en tu testamento, sin la más mínima referencia a mí.

—Entonces, ¿quieres que haga un nuevo testamento?

—Bastará con unas palabras. Ya lo arreglarás la próxima vez que te encuentres con fuerzas.

—En ese caso, tienes que telegrafiar al señor Hilary. No haré nada sin consultar con mi abogado.

—Mañana verás al señor Hilary.

—Se va a pensar que tú y yo nos hemos peleado —dijo el anciano.

—Con toda probabilidad. Y yo encantado de que lo piense —dijo Ralph sonriendo—, y para insistir en la idea, te prevengo de que voy a mostrarme terriblemente antipático, desagradable y distante contigo.

El humor con que pronunció esas palabras pareció conmover al señor Touchett, quien se quedó un momento reflexionando.

—Haré todo lo que tú quieras —dijo el señor Touchett finalmente—; pero no estoy seguro de que sea lo correcto. Dices que quieres insuflar viento a las velas de Isabel, pero ¿no tienes miedo de hacerlo en exceso?

—Me gustaría verla impulsada por la brisa —respondió Ralph.

—Hablas como si para ti esto no fuese más que un divertimento.

—Lo es, y muy grande.

—Pues creo que no lo entiendo —dijo el señor Touchett con un suspiro—. Los jóvenes de hoy sois muy distintos de como era yo. Si a mí me interesaba una muchacha cuando era joven, no me contentaba solo con mirarla. Tú tienes unos escrúpulos que yo no habría albergado, y unas ideas que yo tampoco habría tenido. Dices que Isabel quiere ser libre, y que el hecho de ser rica le evitará casarse por dinero. ¿Es que la crees capaz de hacer algo así?

—En absoluto. Pero tiene menos dinero del que disponía antes. Antes su padre se lo daba todo, porque se dedicaba a gastarse el capital. Ahora no le quedan para vivir más que las migajas de aquel festín, y no sabe bien lo escasas que son, todavía no ha tenido tiempo de enterarse. Mi madre me lo ha contado todo. Isabel no lo sabrá hasta que esté de verdad inmersa en el mundo, y para mí resultaría muy doloroso pensar en el momento en que tomaría conciencia de la gran cantidad de deseos que no podría satisfacer.

—Yo le dejo cinco mil libras. Con eso bien puede hacer realidad muchos deseos.

—Está claro que sí. Pero lo más probable es que se lo gastase en dos o tres años.

—¿Piensas, entonces, que sería una derrochadora?

—No me cabe duda —dijo Ralph, sonriendo con gesto sereno.

La agudeza del pobre señor Touchett iba dando paso rápidamente a la más pura confusión.

—Entonces, ¿sería solo cuestión de tiempo que se gastase una suma más importante?

—No, aunque en un principio creo que se dedicaría a gastar a manos llenas, y que lo más probable es que dé una parte a cada una de sus hermanas. Pero después recobraría el juicio, recordaría que tiene toda una vida por delante y viviría con lo que le quedase.

—Parece que lo has pensado a conciencia —dijo el anciano con impotencia—. Está claro que te interesas por ella.

—Si quieres ser coherente, no puedes decir que voy demasiado lejos. Tú querías que fuese mucho más lejos todavía.

—Bueno, no sé —respondió el señor Touchett—. Creo que no alcanzo a entenderte. A mí me parece inmoral.

—¿Inmoral, querido papá?

—Es que no sé si está bien facilitarle tanto las cosas a una persona.

—Seguramente, eso dependerá de la persona en cuestión. Si la persona es buena, hacerle las cosas fáciles redunda en beneficio de su virtud. ¿Es que hay acto más noble que el de facilitar que se pongan en práctica los buenos impulsos?

Al señor Touchett le resultó un tanto difícil seguir aquel razonamiento, y se dedicó un rato a considerarlo. Al fin, dijo:

—Isabel es una jovencita encantadora, pero ¿la crees tan buena como todo eso?

—Es todo lo buena que le permitan sus mejores oportunidades —replicó Ralph.

—Pues bien —declaró el señor Touchett—, con sesenta mil libras, esas oportunidades no deberían faltarle.

—No dudo de que así será.

—Está claro que voy a hacer lo que tú quieras —dijo el anciano—. Tan solo deseaba entenderlo un poco.

—¿Y no lo entiendes ahora, querido papá? —preguntó el hijo con mucha ternura—. Porque, si no es así, no perderemos más tiempo con este asunto. Lo dejaremos estar.

El señor Touchett permaneció inmóvil durante largo rato. Ralph imaginó que había renunciado a seguir dándole vueltas al asunto. Pero, al fin, empezó de nuevo a hablar con gran lucidez.

—Dime una cosa antes. ¿No se te ha ocurrido pensar que una joven con sesenta mil libras puede caer víctima de los cazadores de fortunas?

—Sería difícil que fuese víctima de más de uno.

—Bueno, con uno habría más que suficiente.

—Está claro. Ese riesgo existe, y entra en mis cálculos. Creo que es un riesgo importante, pero poco probable, y estoy dispuesto a asumirlo.

La agudeza del señor Touchett se había tornado en perplejidad, y dicha perplejidad se convirtió ahora en admiración.

—¡Vaya si te lo has pensado! —repitió—. Pero lo que no entiendo es qué vas a sacar tú de bueno con todo esto.

Ralph se inclinó hacia su padre y le ahuecó con suavidad los almohadones; era consciente de que la conversación se había prolongado en exceso.

—Lo que yo voy a sacar de bueno es lo que dije hace un momento que quería poner al alcance de Isabel: hacer realidad las exigencias de mi imaginación. Pero resulta escandalosa la manera en que me he aprovechado de ti.

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Como había anticipado la señora Touchett, Isabel y madame Merle se vieron obligadas a verse tanto durante la enfermedad de su anfitrión que casi habría sido una infracción de las normas de la cortesía no haberse hecho íntimas. Los modales de ambas eran exquisitos, pero es que, además, daba la casualidad de que se agradaban la una a la otra. Quizá resulte exagerado decir que se juraron amistad eterna, pero al menos tácitamente pusieron al futuro por testigo. Isabel lo hizo con perfecta conciencia, pese a que habría tenido sus dudas a la hora de reconocerse íntima de su nueva amiga en el alto sentido que atribuía en su interior a dicho término. Es más, a menudo se preguntaba si alguna vez había sido, o si alguna vez podría ser, íntima de nadie. Tenía un ideal de la amistad, al igual que lo tenía de otros sentimientos, que en este caso (en otros no había sido así) le parecía que no alcanzaba a plasmarse del todo. Aun así a menudo se recordaba a sí misma que existían razones fundamentales que impedían que un ideal se convirtiese jamás en algo concreto. Era algo en lo que había que creer, no algo visible; no era cuestión de experiencia, sino de fe. La experiencia, no obstante, podría proporcionarnos imitaciones muy plausibles de un ideal, y era cometido de la sabiduría sacarles el máximo partido. Con todo, lo cierto era que Isabel jamás se había encontrado con un personaje más agradable ni más interesante que madame Merle; nunca había conocido a una persona que careciera menos que ella de ese defecto que representa el principal obstáculo para la amistad: esa apariencia de no estar sino reproduciendo los aspectos más tediosos, manidos y conocidos hasta la saciedad del carácter de uno mismo. Las puertas de la confianza de la joven estaban abiertas de par en par, más de lo que nunca lo habían estado; a aquella amable interlocutora le decía cosas que jamás había llegado a decir a ninguna otra persona. A veces aquella sinceridad llegaba a asustarla: era como si hubiese depositado en manos de una persona hasta cierto punto desconocida la llave de su joyero. Aquellas gemas espirituales eran las únicas de cierta importancia que Isabel poseía, razón de más para custodiarlas celosamente. Al final, no obstante, siempre se recordaba que jamás hay que lamentarse de un error fruto de la generosidad, y que si madame Merle carecía de aquellas virtudes que ella le atribuía, tanto peor para madame Merle. Era indudable que grandes virtudes sí que tenía: era encantadora, comprensiva, inteligente, culta. Y lo que era aún más importante (ya que Isabel no había tenido la mala fortuna de ir por la vida sin tropezarse con varias personas de su mismo sexo de las que con toda justicia se podía afirmar lo mismo), se trataba de alguien único, superior, preeminente. En el mundo hay muchas personas agradables, pero madame Merle distaba mucho de ser bondadosa a la manera vulgar o pertinazmente ocurrente. Era capaz de pensar, virtud rara en las mujeres, y que había ejercitado con muy buen resultado. Además, claro está, era capaz de sentir; Isabel no podía haber pasado una semana en su compañía sin haber tenido certeza de ello. Ese era sin duda el gran talento de madame Merle, su don más perfecto. La vida había dejado su huella en ella; la había sentido con intensidad, y parte de la satisfacción de ser aceptada en su compañía residía en que cuando la joven hablaba de lo que gustaba en llamar asuntos serios, la dama en cuestión la comprendía al instante sin ningún problema. La emoción, todo hay que decirlo, se había convertido para ella en algo que pertenecía a la historia; no ocultaba el hecho de que el manantial de la pasión, al haberse visto explotado en demasía en otra época, ya no fluía con la misma intensidad de antaño. Y es más, como era de esperar, se proponía dejar de sentir; reconocía sin tapujos que en otros tiempos había perdido un poco la cabeza, y que ahora pretendía actuar con toda cordura.

—Juzgo más de lo que solía —le dijo a Isabel—, pero me parece que me he ganado el derecho a hacerlo. Hasta los cuarenta, se es incapaz de juzgar; antes de esa edad somos demasiado vehementes, demasiado duros, demasiado crueles, y, por si fuera poco, demasiado ignorantes. Lo lamento por usted, ya que aún le falta mucho para alcanzar los cuarenta. Pero toda ganancia supone algún tipo de pérdida. A menudo pienso que después de los cuarenta uno es incapaz de sentir de verdad. Es evidente que la frescura, la inmediatez, han desaparecido. Usted las conservará durante más tiempo que la mayoría; será una gran satisfacción para mí verla dentro de unos años. Quiero ver en qué la convierte la vida. Una cosa es segura: es imposible que la eche a perder. Acaso la someta a pruebas horribles, pero estoy más que segura de que no la destruirá.

Isabel recibió aquella muestra de confianza de la misma forma en que un joven soldado, todavía jadeante tras haber salido con honor de una pequeña escaramuza, recibiría una palmadita de su coronel en el hombro. Al igual que

tal reconocimiento al mérito, el suyo parecía provenir de alguien con autoridad. ¿Qué otra reacción podría provocar incluso la más insignificante palabra si procedía de una persona que, ante casi cualquier cosa que Isabel le contase, decía: «Ay, querida, yo ya he pasado por eso; y acaba pasando, como toda en la vida»? A muchos de sus interlocutores, madame Merle podría haberles resultado irritante: se hacía muy difícil y desconcertante alcanzar a sorprenderla. Pero Isabel, aunque no fuese ni mucho menos incapaz de sentir deseos de impresionarla, no experimentaba en el momento presente tal impulso. Era demasiado sincera; sentía demasiado interés por su juiciosa amiga. Y, por si fuera poco, madame Merle jamás decía aquellas cosas en son de triunfo ni de jactancia; las dejaba caer como frías confesiones.

Un período de mal tiempo empezaba a afectar Gardencourt; los días se hicieron más cortos y pusieron fin a aquellos alegres tés en el jardín. Pero nuestra joven mantenía largas conversaciones con su amiga en el interior de la casa, y, pese a la lluvia, ambas damas a menudo se aventuraban a dar un paseo, equipadas con esos artilugios defensivos que el clima inglés y el genio inglés se han confabulado para llevar a un alto grado de perfección. A madame Merle le gustaba casi todo, hasta la lluvia inglesa. «Siempre cae una poca y nunca demasiada de golpe —afirmaba—; jamás te empapa y siempre huele bien.» Declaraba que en Inglaterra eran inmensos los placeres para el olfato, que en aquella isla inigualable había un mezcla de olor a bruma, a cerveza y a hollín que, por extraño que parezca, constituía el aroma nacional y resultaba de lo más agradable al olfato; y acostumbraba a acercarse la manga de su gabán inglés y a hundir la nariz en él para inhalar el perfume suave y delicado de la lana. El pobre Ralph Touchett, tan pronto como el otoño comenzó a hacerse notar, se convirtió prácticamente en un recluso; cuando el tiempo era malo, no podía salir de la casa, y a veces se plantaba delante de una de las ventanas, con las manos en los bolsillos y, en una actitud mezcla de reproche y crítica, observaba a Isabel y madame Merle mientras recorrían la alameda cobijadas bajo sendos paraguas. Las sendas que atravesaban Gardencourt eran tan firmes, incluso en el peor de los días, que ambas damas regresaban siempre con un saludable color en las mejillas, examinaban las suelas de sus botas, limpias y recias, y aseguraban que el paseo les había sentado maravillosamente bien. Antes del almuerzo madame Merle estaba siempre ocupada; Isabel admiraba y envidiaba a su amiga aquella rígida distribución de la mañana. Nuestra heroína siempre había sido considerada una persona de recursos, y se había enorgullecido un tanto de serlo; sin embargo, se dedicaba a deambular, como si se encontrase al otro lado de la tapia que rodea un jardín privado, alrededor de los talentos, logros y aptitudes de madame Merle. Se sentía deseosa de emularlos, y en un sinnúmero de aspectos aquella dama constituía todo un modelo. «¡Cuánto me gustaría ser así!», exclamó Isabel para sus adentros en más de una ocasión, a medida que iban saliendo a la luz las cualidades más sobresalientes de su amiga, y no tardó mucho en darse cuenta de que había aprendido una lección de tan alta autoridad. En verdad, no necesitó mucho tiempo para sentirse, como se suele decir, bajo su influjo. «¿Qué peligro puede haber —se preguntó —, mientras la influencia sea buena? Cuanto mayor sea la buena influencia que uno reciba, tanto mejor. Lo único que importa es ser consciente de cada paso que damos, entenderlo mientras avanzamos. Y eso, sin duda, lo voy a hacer siempre. No tengo por qué temer convertirme en alguien demasiado maleable; ¿acaso no es culpa mía no serlo lo suficiente?» La imitación, según afirman, es la muestra más sincera de admiración; y si a veces Isabel no podía evitar quedarse boquiabierta ante su amiga con envidia y frustración no era tanto porque desease brillar con luz propia, sino más bien porque lo que quería era llevarle la antorcha a madame Merle. La dama le agradaba en extremo, pero más que atraerla la tenía deslumbrada. A veces se preguntaba qué diría Henrietta al saber cuánta admiración sentía por aquel producto adulterado de la patria común, y tenía el convencimiento de que la juzgaría con mucha severidad. Henrietta no aprobaría en absoluto a madame Merle; y por razones que no podría haber precisado, esa certeza se adueñó de la joven. Por otra parte, estaba asimismo convencida de que, si se presentaba la ocasión, su nueva amiga se formaría una opinión favorable de la antigua: madame Merle tenía demasiado sentido del humor y era demasiado observadora para no hacerle justicia a Henrietta, y conforme fuera conociéndola lo más probable era que diese muestras de un tacto que la señorita Stackpole no podría ni de lejos emular. Madame Merle, gracias a su experiencia, parecía tener criterio para todo, y en algún lugar del enorme baúl de su prodigiosa memoria encontraría la clave de la valía de Henrietta. «Ahí reside lo verdaderamente importante —reflexionó Isabel con solemnidad—, esa es la mayor de las fortunas: disfrutar de una posición mucho más ventajosa para valorar a las personas que la que estas tienen para valorarte a ti.» Y añadió que, pensándolo bien, ahí era exactamente donde radicaba la esencia de la posición aristocrática. Y que en ese aspecto, aunque no en otros, el objetivo de uno debería ser alcanzar dicha posición.

Sería imposible ir contando uno a uno todos los eslabones de la cadena que condujo a Isabel a considerar

aristocrática la posición de madame Merle, opinión jamás expresada por la propia dama cuando hacía referencia a su posición. Había conocido a importantes personajes y asistido a grandes acontecimientos, pero jamás había desempeñado un papel destacado. Ella era unos de los humildes de la tierra; no había estado rodeada de privilegios al nacer; conocía el mundo demasiado bien para albergar fatuas ilusiones acerca del lugar que ocupaba en él. Se había encontrado con muchos de aquellos contados privilegiados y era completamente consciente de en qué aspectos la fortuna de estos difería de la suya propia. Pero si bien según su calibrado sentido de la medida no estaba hecha para ser una figura destacada en el gran teatro del mundo, Isabel, en su imaginación, seguía representándosela con cierta grandeza. Ser tan culta y civilizada, tan sabia y sencilla, y aun así restarle importancia en eso consistía ser una auténtica gran dama, especialmente si una se comportaba y se mostraba como tal. Era como si en cierta medida tuviese a toda la sociedad a su servicio, junto con todas las artes y gentilezas que esta practicaba… ¿O quizá fuese más acertado decir que era efecto de los agradables usos para ella encontrados, incluso a distancia, y que transformaba luego en sutiles servicios que prestaba a un mundo clamoroso dondequiera que se hallase? Tras el desayuno, se dedicaba a escribir una carta tras otra, pues las que le llegaban eran al parecer incontables: su correspondencia era una fuente de sorpresas para Isabel cuando en ocasiones iban juntas a la estafeta de correos de la localidad para depositar allí las ofrendas de madame Merle al servicio postal. Conocía a más gente, según le contó a Isabel, de la que podía contentar, y de continuo aparecía algo nuevo que la obligaba a utilizar la pluma. Sentía verdadera devoción por la pintura, y dibujaba un boceto con la misma facilidad que se despojaba de los guantes. En Gardencourt aprovechaba siempre cualquier rato de sol para salir con el taburete plegable y el estuche de acuarelas. Ya hemos tenido ocasión de ver lo buena pianista que era, y del hecho da prueba que cuando se sentaba al piano, como hacía cada tarde, sus oyentes se resignasen sin rechistar a prescindir del placer de su conversación. Isabel, desde que la había conocido, se sentía avergonzada de su propia aptitud musical, que ahora consideraba de índole claramente inferior; y en verdad, aunque en su país la habían tenido casi por un prodigio, la pérdida para los presentes, cuando al tomar asiento en el taburete del piano les daba la espalda, era considerada en general mayor que la ganancia. Cuando madame Merle no estaba escribiendo, ni leyendo ni tocando el piano, se dedicaba por lo general a realizar maravillosas labores de intrincados bordados, cojines, cortinas, paños para la repisa de la chimenea, un arte que destacaba tanto por lo imaginativo y atrevido de sus creaciones como por la agilidad con la que utilizaba la aguja. No estaba nunca ociosa, ya que cuando no se encontraba inmersa en alguna de las actividades que acabo de mencionar, o bien se entregaba a la lectura (Isabel tenía la impresión de que leía «todo lo que era importante»), o salía a pasear, o hacía solitarios con las cartas, o conversaba con los allí presentes. Y en todo ello daba muestras de su saber estar en sociedad, nunca cometía la grosería de parecer ausente, pero tampoco imponía jamás su presencia. Abandonaba sus pasatiempos con la misma facilidad con que los iniciaba; conversaba mientras se dedicaba a esas labores, y parecía concederle escasa importancia a todo lo que hacía. Regalaba sus dibujos y sus bordados; se levantaba del piano o continuaba tocando, según el deseo de sus oyentes, que adivinaba sin equivocarse nunca. Era, en resumen, la persona más fácil, diligente y entretenida con la que convivir. Si algún defecto tenía para Isabel era la falta de naturalidad; lo cual, para la joven, no implicaba que fuese afectada o pretenciosa, pues no cabía concebir mujer que estuviese más lejos de caer en vicios tan vulgares, sino que su naturaleza había quedado demasiado desdibujada por la costumbre y sus aristas habían sido limadas en demasía. Se había vuelto demasiado acomodaticia, servicial, madura y consumada. En pocas palabras, era, hasta el exceso, ese animal social que se supone que todo hombre o mujer debe aspirar a ser; y se había despojado por completo de esa reconfortante espontaneidad que podemos asumir poseía hasta la persona más sociable en épocas en las que no se había impuesto el estilo de vida de las casas solariegas. A Isabel le resultaba difícil imaginársela en momentos de soledad, en la intimidad; existía únicamente a través de las relaciones, directas o indirectas, que establecía con sus congéneres. La joven se preguntaba qué relación podía en verdad mantener con su propio espíritu. No obstante, siempre llegaba a la conclusión de que una superficie encantadora no implica necesariamente que la persona en cuestión sea superficial; eso no era más que una ilusión que, afortunadamente, pese a su juventud, ella se había librado de alimentar. Madame Merle no era superficial, ella no. Era profunda, y su naturaleza, pese a todo, se revelaba en su modo de comportarse porque este utilizaba un lenguaje convencional. «¿Qué es el lenguaje sino pura convención? —se dijo Isabel—. Y ella tiene el buen gusto de, a diferencia de otros que he conocido, no pretender expresarse por medio de signos originales.»

—Tengo para mí que usted ha sufrido mucho —tuvo ocasión de decirle a su amiga en respuesta a cierta alusión que parecía tener profundas implicaciones.

—¿Qué le hace pensar tal cosa? —preguntó madame Merle con la sonrisa divertida de alguien que juega a las

adivinanzas—. Confío en no dar la impresión exagerada de ser una incomprendida.

—No; pero a veces dice usted unas cosas que, en mi opinión, no habría descubierto una persona que siempre ha sido feliz.

—Yo no siempre he sido feliz —dijo madame Merle sin dejar de sonreír, pero con la gravedad burlona de alguien que le está contando un secreto a un niño—. ¡Qué maravilloso sería eso!

Pero a Isabel no se le pasó por alto la ironía.

—Mucha gente me da la impresión de no haber sentido nada en ningún momento.

—Eso es muy cierto; hay muchas más ollas de hierro que de porcelana. Pero puede usted estar segura de que todas tienen alguna marca. Hasta las ollas de hierro más resistentes tienen alguna pequeña abolladura, un pequeño agujero en alguna parte. Yo presumo de ser más bien recia, pero, si quiere que le diga la verdad, he sufrido desconchones y grietas terribles. Si todavía presto buen servicio, es porque he sido reparada con mucha habilidad, y porque procuro quedarme en la alacena, la alacena oscura y tranquila con olor a especias rancias, cuanto me es posible. Pero cuando me veo obligada a salir y mostrarme a plena luz… entonces, querida, ¡soy un verdadero horror!

No sé con certeza si fue en esta ocasión o en alguna otra cuando, tras haber tomado la conversación el giro mencionado, madame Merle le dijo a Isabel que algún día le referiría una historia. Isabel le aseguró que le encantaría escuchar el relato, y en más de una ocasión le recordó la promesa. Sin embargo, madame Merle le rogó repetidas veces que le concediera un respiro, hasta que por fin habló con franqueza a su joven acompañante y le dijo que debían esperar a conocerse mejor. Y era seguro que tal cosa sucedería, ya que resultaba evidente que ante ellas se abría la perspectiva de una larga amistad. Isabel asintió, pero al mismo tiempo le preguntó si no era digna de su confianza, si la consideraba capaz de traicionar una confidencia.

—No es que sienta temor de que vaya a repetir lo que le diga —respondió su compañera—, más bien todo lo contrario: lo que me da miedo es que se lo tome demasiado a pecho. Me juzgaría con excesiva dureza, pues a su edad se es cruel.

Prefería por el momento hablar con Isabel de la propia Isabel, y mostró el mayor interés por conocer la historia, los sentimientos, las opiniones y los proyectos de nuestra heroína. Se dedicó a hacerla hablar y atendía su charla con infinita condescendencia. Esto halagaba y daba estímulos a la joven, quien estaba impresionada por toda la gente distinguida que su amiga había conocido y porque hubiese disfrutado, en palabras de la señora Touchett, de las mejores compañías que se podían tener en Europa. La opinión que Isabel tenía de sí misma se vio enaltecida al disfrutar del favor de una persona con un campo de comparación tan vasto; y tal vez fuese por sentirse gratificada al salir beneficiada de dicha comparación, por lo que con frecuencia apelaba a aquella provisión de reminiscencias de madame Merle. Esta había vivido en distintos países y mantenía vínculos sociales en una decena de ellos. «Yo no presumo de ser instruida —acostumbraba a decir la dama—, pero creo conocer bien Europa»; y un día hablaba de ir a Suecia a visitar a una vieja amistad, y al siguiente de viajar a Malta en pos de una reciente. Inglaterra, donde había residido con frecuencia, le resultaba totalmente familiar, y, para provecho de Isabel, contaba cosas que arrojaron mucha luz sobre las costumbres del país y la personalidad de sus habitantes, quienes «al fin y a la postre», como le gustaba decir, eran las mejores personas del mundo para convivir.

—No debes extrañarte de que permanezca aquí en un momento como este, cuando el señor Touchett se está muriendo —comentó la esposa del caballero a su sobrina—. Ella es incapaz de cometer un error, es la mujer con más tacto que conozco. Si se queda, es por deferencia hacia mí. Ha pospuesto un montón de visitas a grandes mansiones —dijo la señora Touchett, quien no olvidaba que siempre que se encontraba en Inglaterra su propia cotización social descendía dos o tres enteros en la escala—. Tiene mucho donde elegir; no le faltan techos para cobijarse. Pero yo le he pedido que se quede un tiempo porque quiero que la conozcas. Creo que será beneficioso para ti. Serena Merle es una mujer sin defectos.

—Si no me gustase tanto ya, encontraría alarmante esa descripción —respondió Isabel.

—Ella jamás está ni un milímetro fuera de lugar. Yo te he traído aquí y deseo hacer por ti todo lo que esté a mi alcance. Tu hermana Lily me dijo que esperaba que yo te ofreciese muchas oportunidades. Y es lo que estoy haciendo al ponerte en contacto con madame Merle, que es una de las mujeres más brillantes de Europa.

—Me agrada más madame Merle que la descripción que usted hace de ella —insistió Isabel.

—¿Presumes que vas a encontrar alguna vez motivo para criticarla? Espero que, si tal cosa ocurre, me lo hagas saber.

—Eso sería una crueldad… hacia usted.

—Por mí no te preocupes. No vas a encontrarle un solo defecto.

—Puede que no. Pero me atrevo a decir que tampoco se me escaparía.

—Madame Merle sabe todo lo que hay que saber en este mundo.

Tras esta conversación, Isabel le comentó a su amiga que esperaba que estuviese al tanto de que, en opinión de la señora Touchett, su perfección no tenía mácula. A lo que madame Merle contestó:

—Le agradezco mucho que me lo diga, pero me temo que su tía es incapaz de imaginar, o al menos de nombrar, aberraciones que no salten a la vista.

—¿Quiere con eso decir que tiene usted un lado oscuro que ella desconoce?

—Por supuesto que no, mucho me temo que mis lados más oscuros sean también los más inofensivos. Lo que quiero decir es que, para su tía, carecer de defectos significa no llegar tarde a la hora de la cena, es decir, de su cena. Y, a propósito, yo no me retrasé el otro día cuando usted llegó de Londres; estaban dando las ocho en el reloj cuando entré en el salón, así que fueron el resto de ustedes los que se adelantaron. También significa contestar las cartas el mismo día en que se reciben y, cuando se viene a visitarla, no traer equipaje en exceso y procurar no ponerse enfermo. Para la señora Touchett son esas las cosas que constituyen la virtud; y es una bendición poder reducirla a sus elementos.

La conversación de madame Merle, como se puede apreciar, estaba salpicada de notas críticas, audaces y francas, que nunca, ni siquiera cuando tenían un efecto restrictivo, le parecieron a Isabel malintencionadas. A la joven ni se le pasaba por la mente que la distinguida invitada de la señora Touchett estuviese denigrándola, y eso era así por varias razones. En primer lugar, Isabel estaba de acuerdo por completo con sus opiniones; en segundo lugar, madame Merle daba a entender que quedaban muchas más cosas por decir; y, en tercer lugar, resultaba evidente que el hecho de que una persona hablase sin ceremonia alguna de tus parientes cercanos era grata señal de la intimidad existente entre ambas. Y esas señales de intensa comunicación se iban multiplicando con el paso de los días, y a ninguna de ellas era Isabel más sensible que a la preferencia que su acompañante mostraba por convertir a la propia señorita Archer en tema de conversación. Pese a que con frecuencia se refería a los acontecimientos de su propia existencia, madame Merle nunca se detenía en ellos, pues tenía tan poco de egoísta vulgar como de chismosa manifiesta.

—Yo ya estoy vieja, anticuada y sin lustre —dijo en más de una ocasión—. Tengo tan poco interés como un periódico atrasado. Usted es joven y fresca y está al día; tiene algo muy importante: actualidad. Yo también tuve eso en otros tiempos, es algo de lo que todos disfrutamos brevemente. Usted, sin embargo, lo va a disfrutar durante más tiempo. Así pues, hablemos de usted: no hay nada que pueda decirme que no me interese escuchar. Eso de que me guste hablar con gente más joven es señal de que me estoy haciendo mayor. Creo que es una manera muy hermosa de compensar las cosas. Si no podemos sentir la juventud en nuestro interior, lo que sí podemos hacer es rodearnos de ella por fuera, y de verdad creo que de esta forma la apreciemos y la sentimos mejor. Es evidente que debemos estar en sintonía con ella, y yo siempre lo voy a estar. Ignoro si alguna vez voy a mostrarme malhumorada con la gente de edad, espero que no, y es innegable que hay algunas personas mayores a las que adoro. Pero ante los jóvenes nunca podré evitar mostrarme servil: me emocionan y me atraen demasiado. Así pues, le doy a usted *carte blanche*; puede incluso mostrarse impertinente si le apetece; yo se lo toleraré y la malcriaré terriblemente. Pensará usted que hablo como si tuviese cien años. Pues sí, si vamos a eso, nací antes de la Revolución francesa. Ay, amiga mía, *je viens de loins*, pertenezco al pasado, al Viejo Mundo. Pero no es de eso de lo que quiero hablar, quiero hablar del Nuevo. Tiene que hablarme más de Estados Unidos, nunca me habla lo suficiente. Vivo en este continente desde que siendo una criatura indefensa me trajeron aquí, y es ridículo, o más bien escandaloso, lo poco que sé de aquel país espléndido, tremendo y curioso… sin duda el más grande y estrafalario de todos. Hay muchos expatriados como yo por estos parajes, y debo decir que, en mi opinión, somos un grupo de gente desgraciada. Uno debería vivir en su propio país; sea como sea, es el lugar natural de cada uno. Si no somos buenos estadounidenses, lo que está claro es que como europeos somos mediocres; este no es nuestro lugar natural. Somos meros parásitos que se arrastran por la superficie, no tenemos los pies en el suelo. Lo mínimo que podemos hacer es ser conscientes de ello y no hacernos ilusiones. Tal vez las mujeres se defiendan mejor, puesto que, para mí, la mujer no tiene su lugar en ninguna parte: allí donde se encuentre, tiene que permanecer en la superficie y, en mayor o menor medida, arrastrarse por ella. ¿Protesta usted, amiga mía? ¿Se siente horrorizada? ¿Asegura que usted jamás se arrastrará? Es muy cierto que yo no me la imagino arrastrándose; se mantiene usted más erguida que la mayoría de los pobres mortales. Está bien, yo no creo que usted vaya a arrastrarse. Pero los hombres, los hombres estadounidenses, *je vous demande un peu*, ¿cómo se organizan por estos pagos? No les envidio sus esfuerzos por amoldarse. Piense en el pobre Ralph Touchett: ¿cómo

definiría usted a un personaje así? Por fortuna, tiene la tisis; y digo por fortuna, porque gracias a eso tiene algo en lo que ocuparse. La tisis que padece es su *carrière*, algo así como una posición. Uno puede decir: «Ah, sí, el señor Touchett se dedica a cuidar sus pulmones, sabe mucho de climas». Pero, si no tuviera eso, ¿quién sería?, ¿a quién representaría? «El señor Touchett es un estadounidense que vive en Europa.» Y eso no quiere decir nada en absoluto, no puede haber nada que tenga menos significado. «Es muy cultivado», afirman, «tiene una colección muy bonita de cajitas de rapé antiguas.» La colección es todo lo que hace falta para convertir la cosa en digna de lástima. Y estoy harta del sonido de esa palabra, me parece grotesca. Con su pobre padre anciano, la cosa cambia: él tiene identidad propia, y más bien contundente. Representa a una importante institución financiera, y eso, en nuestra época, es tan bueno como cualquier otra cosa. Para un estadounidense, al menos, eso es más que suficiente. Pero insisto en considerar muy afortunado a su primo por padecer un mal crónico, siempre que no se muera. Es mucho mejor eso que las cajas de rapé. Si no estuviese enfermo, ¿dice usted que haría algo? ¿Que ocuparía el lugar de su padre en la empresa? Mi pobre niña, yo lo dudo, no creo que sienta el más mínimo interés por la empresa. No obstante, usted lo conoce mejor que yo, aunque en el pasado yo llegué a conocerlo bastante bien, y puede concedérsele el beneficio de la duda. El peor caso que yo conozco es el de un amigo mío, compatriota nuestro, que vive en Italia (adonde también lo llevaron antes de tener uso de razón), y que es uno de los hombres más encantadores que he tratado en mi vida. Ya lo conocerá algún día. Yo los pondré en contacto, y entonces verá usted lo que quiero decir. Se llama Gilbert Osmond y vive en Italia, eso es cuanto uno puede decir o saber de él. Es sumamente inteligente, un hombre nacido para sobresalir, pero, tal como le he dicho, la descripción de su persona se agota con decir que se apellida Osmond y que vive *tout bêtement* en Italia. Sin carrera, sin renombre, sin posición, sin fortuna, sin pasado, sin futuro, sin nada de nada. Bueno, sí, pinta, por decir algo… pinta acuarelas como yo, solo que mejor. Su pintura es más bien mala, cosa que, al fin y al cabo, me alegra. Por fortuna es muy indolente, su indolencia es tanta que constituye una especie de posición. Así, puede permitirse decir: «Ah, yo no hago nada, soy demasiado perezoso. Hoy día no se puede hacer nada, a menos que uno se levante a las cinco de la mañana». De esa forma, se convierte en una especie de excepción; uno llega a pensar que, si tan solo madrugase un poco, haría algo. Nunca habla de su pintura… a la gente en general es demasiado inteligente para hacerlo. Pero tiene una hijita, una niña encantadora, y de ella sí que habla. Vive dedicado a ella, y si ser un padre excelente fuese una carrera, él se distinguiría mucho. Pero me temo que no sea mejor que lo de las cajitas de rapé, puede que incluso sea peor. Cuénteme a qué se dedican en Estados Unidos —insistió madame Merle, quien, dicho sea entre paréntesis, no expresó de una vez todas estas reflexiones, que aquí aparecen agrupadas para comodidad del lector.

Habló de Florencia, donde residía el señor Osmond y donde la señora Touchett ocupaba un palacio medieval; habló de Roma, donde ella poseía un pequeño *pied-à-terre* con damascos antiguos de gran valor. Habló de lugares, de gentes e incluso, como suele decirse, de «asuntos»; y de vez en cuando, hacía referencia a su anciano y amable anfitrión y a la probabilidad de que experimentase una mejoría. Desde un principio, había considerado dicha probabilidad muy remota, y a Isabel la había impresionado la forma positiva, competente y analítica con que calibraba lo que al anciano le quedaba de vida. Una tarde anunció categóricamente que al señor Touchett no le quedaba mucho tiempo de vida.

—Me lo dijo sir Matthew Hope con toda la claridad que permite el decoro —dijo—; ahí mismo, de pie frente a la chimenea, antes de cenar. El eminente doctor es muy agradable. No quiero decir que lo sea por habérmelo contado. Pero dice las cosas con mucho tacto. Yo le había mencionado que me sentía incómoda al estar aquí en un momento así, me parecía una verdadera indiscreción, y tampoco es que yo vaya a cuidar del enfermo. «Debe quedarse, tiene usted que quedarse», me respondió, «su utilidad se verá más tarde.» ¿Acaso no fue esa una manera muy delicada de decirme a la vez que al pobre señor Touchett no le queda mucho y que yo puedo resultar útil para consolar a la familia? De hecho, sin embargo, no voy a ser de utilidad alguna. Su tía se consolará sola; ella, y solo ella, sabe cuánto consuelo va a necesitar. Sería asunto muy delicado que otra persona quisiese encargarse de administrarle la dosis. En cuanto a su primo, la cosa será distinta: va a echar muchísimo de menos a su padre. Pero yo jamás pretendería acompañar a Ralph en su dolor; no tenemos ese tipo de relación.

Madame Merle había hecho alusión en más de una ocasión, sin aclararlo, a la existencia de cierta incongruencia en su relación con Ralph Touchett; así que Isabel aprovechó la oportunidad para preguntarle si no mantenían una buena amistad.

—Nos llevamos a la perfección, pero no le gusto.

—¿Qué le ha hecho usted?

—Nada en absoluto. Pero no se necesitan razones para algo así.

—¿Para que usted no le guste? Yo creo que se necesita una muy buena razón.

—Eso es muy amable de su parte. Asegúrese de contar con una el día que empiece usted a sentir que no le agrado.

—¿Que empiece a sentir que no me agrada? Eso jamás sucederá.

—Espero que no; porque si alguna vez empieza, ya no habrá forma de parar. Eso es lo que ocurre con su primo, es incapaz de superarlo. Es una incompatibilidad de caracteres, si es que puede llamarse así a algo que solo ocurre por su parte. Yo no tengo nada en absoluto en su contra y no le guardo el más mínimo rencor por no hacerme justicia. Y yo lo único que pido es eso, justicia. No obstante, lo considero un caballero, incapaz de decir jamás nada inadecuado sobre mí. *Cartes sur table* —añadió madame Merle un instante después—, no le tengo miedo.

—Eso espero —dijo Isabel, quien añadió algo referente a que Ralph era una de las criaturas más bondadosas sobre la faz de la tierra.

No obstante, recordó que la primera vez que le había preguntado por madame Merle él le había respondido de una forma que, sin ser explícita, dicha dama podría haber considerado injuriosa. Había algo entre ellos, se dijo para sí Isabel, pero no pasó de ahí. Si era algo importante, habría que tratarlo con respeto; si no lo era, no se merecía su curiosidad. Pese a todo su afán de conocimiento, tenía una repulsión innata a levantar cortinas y escudriñar rincones oscuros. El afán de conocimiento coexistía en su mente con una refinada capacidad para la ignorancia.

Pero a veces madame Merle decía cosas que le causaban sobresalto, que le hacían enarcar las claras cejas al oírlas y reflexionar sobre ellas más adelante.

—¡Qué no daría yo por volver a tener su edad! —exclamó en cierta ocasión con una amargura que, aunque diluida en su acostumbrada actitud de total desenvoltura, no logró disimular del todo—. ¡Ojalá pudiese empezar de nuevo! ¡Ojalá tuviese toda la vida por delante!

—Usted tiene aún toda la vida por delante —respondió Isabel en voz baja, pues se sentía un tanto anonadada.

—No, la mejor parte ya ha pasado, y no ha servido para nada.

—Seguramente habrá servido para algo.

—¿Para qué? ¿Qué he conseguido? Ni marido, ni hijos, ni fortuna, ni posición, ni las huellas de una belleza que nunca tuve.

—Tiene usted muchas amistades, querida señora.

—¡Yo no estoy tan segura! —exclamó madame Merle.

—Ah, se equivoca usted. Tiene usted recuerdos, encanto, aptitudes…

Pero madame Merle la interrumpió.

—¿Y qué he conseguido con mis aptitudes? Nada, solo la necesidad de tener que seguir utilizándolas para pasar las horas, los años, para engañarme a mí misma con una pretensión de movimiento, de inconsciencia. Con respecto a mi encanto y mis recuerdos, cuanto menos hablemos de ellos mejor. Usted será mi amiga hasta que descubra un mejor uso para su amistad.

—En ese caso, dependerá de usted asegurarse de que no sea así.

—Sí, y me esforzaré en conservar su amistad —contestó madame Merle mirándola con seriedad—. Cuando digo que desearía tener su edad, hablo de tener sus cualidades, de ser franca, generosa y sincera como usted. Si hubiese sido así, habría sacado mejor partido a mi vida.

—¿Qué le gustaría haber hecho que no haya logrado hacer?

Madame Merle tomó una partitura —estaba sentada al piano y se había girado bruscamente sobre la banqueta cuando empezó a hablar—, y se puso a pasar las hojas de forma automática.

—¡Soy muy ambiciosa! —respondió al fin.

—¿Y sus ambiciones no se han visto satisfechas? Deben de haber sido grandes.

—Eran grandes. Me pondría en ridículo si hablase de ellas.

Isabel se preguntó cuáles habían podido ser dichas ambiciones… si acaso madame Merle habría tenido la aspiración de ceñirse una corona.

—No sé cuál será para usted la idea del éxito, pero a mí me parece que ha triunfado. Para mí es usted la viva imagen del éxito.

Madame Merle dejó a un lado la partitura con una sonrisa.

—¿Y qué idea del éxito tiene usted?

—Es evidente que usted piensa que una muy modesta. Para mí el éxito consiste en ver realizado un sueño de

juventud.

—¡Ay, yo jamás he visto eso! —exclamó madame Merle—. Pero mis sueños eran tan desmesurados, tan absurdos… Que Dios me perdone, estoy soñando ahora.

Y se giró de nuevo hacia el piano y se puso a tocar con pasión. A la mañana siguiente le dijo a Isabel que su definición del éxito había sido muy hermosa, si bien terriblemente desoladora. Si se medía con ese rasero, ¿quién podría haber tenido éxito alguna vez? Los sueños de juventud, tan encantadores ellos, tan divinos… ¿Quién había visto jamás que tales cosas se hiciesen realidad?

—Pues yo, sin ir más lejos… algunos de ellos —se aventuró a contestar Isabel.

—¿Tan pronto? Si deben de haber sido sueños de ayer mismo.

—Comencé a tener sueños muy joven.

—Ya, si de lo que habla es de anhelos infantiles, como tener una cinta rosa o una muñeca que cerrase los ojos…

—No, no es a eso a lo que me refiero.

—O un joven de hermoso bigote arrodillándose ante usted.

—No, tampoco quiero decir eso.

Madame Merle pareció notar la vehemencia con la que hablaba Isabel.

—Sospecho que sí que es eso lo que usted quiere decir. Todas hemos soñado con el joven del bigote. Es el inevitable joven, pero eso no cuenta.

Isabel se quedó un rato en silencio, pero a continuación, cuando habló, lo hizo con su habitual inconsecuencia.

—¿Y por qué razón no habría de contar? Hay jóvenes y jóvenes.

—Y el suyo era una auténtica maravilla, ¿es eso lo que quiere decir? —preguntó su amiga con una carcajada—. Si usted ha conseguido a ese joven de sus sueños, entonces es que ha tenido éxito y la felicito de todo corazón. Pero, si ese es el caso, ¿por qué no huyó con él a su castillo de los Apeninos?

—Él no tiene un castillo en los Apeninos.

—¿Y qué tiene? ¿Una fea casa de ladrillo en la calle Cuarenta? No me diga que así es; me niego a aceptar que eso sea un ideal.

—A mí su casa me trae sin cuidado —dijo Isabel.

—Qué ingenuo de su parte. Cuando haya vivido tanto como yo, se dará cuenta de que todo ser humano tiene su propio caparazón, y de que eso es algo a tener en cuenta. Cuando digo caparazón, me estoy refiriendo al conjunto de circunstancias que lo rodean. No existen el hombre ni la mujer totalmente aislados. Todos nosotros estamos hechos de una serie de pertenencias. ¿Qué entendemos por el propio yo? ¿Dónde empieza y dónde termina? Rebasa sus límites y abarca todo cuanto nos pertenece, para después retraerse de nuevo. Yo sé que una parte importante de mí está en la ropa que elijo vestir. Tengo sumo respeto a las cosas materiales. Nuestro yo, para los demás, es la expresión que de él les ofrecemos; y nuestra casa, nuestros muebles, nuestra indumentaria, los libros que leemos, las compañías que frecuentamos, son las cosas a través de las que se expresa.

Aquello era muy metafísico, aunque tampoco lo era más que otras observaciones que madame Merle había hecho con anterioridad. A Isabel le gustaba la metafísica, pero se sintió incapaz de seguir a su amiga en aquel audaz análisis de la personalidad humana.

—No estoy de acuerdo con usted. Opino justo lo contrario. No sé si he logrado expresarme, pero sé que no hay nada más que se exprese por mí. Nada de lo que me pertenece es rasero para medirme; al contrario, todo representa un límite, una barrera, y además es completamente arbitrario. Lo cierto es que la ropa que, como dice usted, elijo vestir, no expresa mi personalidad, ¡Dios me libre de que así fuese!

—Usted viste muy bien —interpuso madame Merle a la ligera.

—Posiblemente; pero no me interesa que me juzguen por eso. Puede que mi ropa exprese la personalidad de la modista, pero no expresa la mía. Para empezar, yo no llevo estos vestidos por elección propia: me los impone la sociedad.

—¿Es que preferiría no llevarlos? —preguntó madame Merle en un tono que prácticamente daba por zanjada la discusión.

Me veo obligado a confesar, aunque pueda suponer cierto descrédito para la descripción que he dado de la lealtad juvenil que nuestra heroína mostraba hacia aquella distinguida dama, que Isabel no le había dicho nada en absoluto acerca de lord Warburton y que se había mostrado igual de reticente en lo que a Caspar Goodwood se refería. Sin embargo, no había ocultado el hecho de que había tenido oportunidades de contraer matrimonio y había incluso

informado a su amiga de las ventajas que estas habrían comportado. Lord Warburton había abandonado Lockleigh y se había marchado a Escocia, llevándose a sus hermanas con él; y, aunque le había escrito a Ralph en más de una ocasión para interesarse por la salud del señor Touchett, Isabel se había ahorrado así el embarazo de tales indagaciones, ya que, de haberse encontrado el joven aún en la vecindad, lo más probable es que se hubiese sentido inclinado a acudir a interesarse en persona. Los modales de lord Warburton no tenían tacha, pero Isabel estaba segura de que, de haber acudido a Gardencourt, habría conocido a madame Merle, y si la hubiese conocido, le habría agradado y le habría confiado que estaba enamorado de su joven amiga. Era fruto de la casualidad que, en el curso de las anteriores visitas de la dama a Gardencourt (todas ellas mucho más breves que la presente), o bien él no se encontrase en Lockleigh o bien no hubiese acudido a visitar al señor Touchett. Por lo tanto, si bien madame Merle lo conocía de oídas como el hombre más importante del condado, no tenía motivo alguno para sospechar que fuese uno de los pretendientes de la sobrina recién importada de la señora Touchett.

—Tiene usted aún mucho tiempo —le había dicho a Isabel en respuesta a las confidencias parciales que nuestra joven le había hecho y que no pretendían ser perfectas, aunque, como hemos visto, había momentos en los que nuestra joven se arrepentía de haber hablado tanto—. Me alegra que todavía no haya hecho nada al respecto, que aún le quede eso por hacer. Está muy bien que una joven rechace unas cuantas buenas ofertas, siempre y cuando, está claro, no sean estas las mejores que con toda probabilidad vaya a recibir. Discúlpeme si mis palabras le resultan horriblemente corruptas, pero a veces no queda más remedio que adoptar un punto de vista mundano. Ahora bien, no siga rechazándolas porque sí. Es un ejercicio de poder muy satisfactorio, pero, al fin y a la postre, aceptarlas implica también un ejercicio de poder. Siempre se corre el peligro de rechazar en exceso, algo en lo que yo no incurrí… porque no rechacé lo suficiente. Usted es una criatura exquisita, y me gustaría verla casada con un primer ministro. Pero, sabe, hablando en plata, no es usted lo que suele llamarse técnicamente un *parti*. Es usted atractiva e inteligente en extremo, es en sí misma realmente excepcional. Parece tener una idea más bien vaga de sus bienes terrenales; pero, por lo que yo deduzco, no dispone del alivio de una renta. Ojalá contase usted con algo de dinero.

—¡Ya me gustaría a mí! —dijo Isabel sin más, olvidando al parecer por un momento que su pobreza no había sido más que un pecado venial a ojos de dos galantes caballeros.

Pese a la benévola recomendación que le había hecho sir Matthew Hope, madame Merle no se quedó para ver el final de la enfermedad del pobre señor Touchett, algo de lo que ahora ya se hablaba sin tapujos. Tenía compromisos con otras personas que no podía eludir por más tiempo, y abandonó Gardencourt no sin antes convenir que, en cualquier caso, se reuniría de nuevo con la señora Touchett, ya fuera allí o en Londres, antes de dejar Inglaterra. Su despedida de Isabel fue más parecida incluso al comienzo de una amistad de lo que lo había sido su primer encuentro.

—Voy a visitar seis lugares distintos, uno tras otro, pero no encontraré a nadie que me agrade tanto como usted. Todas ellas son, sin embargo, viejas amistades, ya que a mi edad no se hacen nuevos amigos. En su caso, he hecho una gran excepción. No lo olvide y sea todo lo benévola que pueda cuando piense en mí. Debe recompensarme creyendo en mí.

Por toda respuesta, Isabel le dio un beso, y, si bien hay mujeres que besan con facilidad, lo cierto es que hay besos y besos, y este en cuestión resultó más que satisfactorio para madame Merle. Después de esto, nuestra joven se encontró muy sola; tan solo veía a su tía y a su primo en el transcurso de las comidas, y descubrió que de todas aquellas horas en que la señora Touchett se encontraba ausente, no dedicaba ahora más que una mínima parte al cuidado de su marido. El resto las pasaba en sus propios aposentos, a los que ni siquiera permitía el acceso a su sobrina, donde se ocupaba al parecer en tareas misteriosas e inescrutables. En la mesa se mostraba grave y silenciosa, pero dicha solemnidad no era tan solo una actitud, como Isabel comprobó, sino algo que hacía por convicción. Se preguntaba si su tía se sentía arrepentida de haber hecho tan a menudo lo que se le antojaba, pero no había pruebas visibles de que así fuera: ni lágrimas, ni suspiros ni muestras exageradas de un celo que siempre, a su propio entender, había sido el adecuado. Parecía sencillamente que la señora Touchett sintiese la necesidad de reflexionar y hacer balance; tenía un librillo de contabilidad moral, con columnas perfectamente trazadas y un fuerte cierre de acero, que llevaba con ejemplar pulcritud. Con todo, las reflexiones que hacía en voz alta tenían siempre resonancias prácticas.

—Si hubiera previsto esta situación, no te habría propuesto que vinieses a Europa en este momento —le dijo a Isabel después de que madame Merle hubiese abandonado la casa—. Habría esperado y te habría hecho venir el año próximo.

—Pero de esa forma tal vez no habría conocido nunca a mi tío. Para mí es una gran alegría haber venido ahora.

—Me parece muy bien. Pero yo no te traje a Europa para que pudieses conocer a tu tío.

Era aquella una declaración absolutamente veraz, pero, en opinión de Isabel, no resultaba igual de oportuna. Tenía ahora tiempo sobrado para pensar en aquel y en otros asuntos. Daba paseos solitarios a diario y mataba las horas hojeando los libros de la biblioteca. Entre los asuntos que reclamaban su atención se encontraban las andanzas de su amiga, la señorita Stackpole, con quien mantenía una correspondencia continua. A Isabel el estilo epistolar privado de su amiga le gustaba más que el público; es decir, pensaba que sus crónicas periodísticas habrían sido excelentes si no hubieran sido publicadas. La carrera profesional de Henrietta, sin embargo, no era todo lo brillante que se habría podido desear, incluso desde la perspectiva de su felicidad personal; aquella visión de la vida privada en Gran Bretaña que ella tanto había ansiado describir parecía estar danzando ante sus ojos como *ignis fatuus*. La invitación de lady Pensil, por alguna misteriosa razón, nunca le llegó; y el pobre señor Bantling, con toda su amistosa inventiva, había sido incapaz de explicarle tan grave desatención hacia una misiva que él sin duda había enviado. Era evidente que se había tomado muy en serio todo lo concerniente a Henrietta, y creía deberle una compensación por el desengaño de la visita a Bedfordshire. «Dice que en su opinión debería irme al continente —escribió Henrietta—, y como él también está pensando en ir, supongo que su consejo es sincero. Quiere saber por qué no me decido a estudiar la vida francesa, y lo cierto es que siento vivos deseos de conocer la nueva República. Al señor Bantling la República no le interesa demasiado, pero está pensando en ir a París de todas formas. Tengo que reconocer que es todo lo atento que yo podría desear, y que por lo menos habré conocido a un inglés educado. No ceso de repetirle al señor Bantling que debería haber sido estadounidense, y no te puedes imaginar cuándo le agrada oír eso. Cada vez que se lo digo, me responde con la misma exclamación: "¡Venga ya, qué cosas tiene usted!".»

Unos días más tarde escribió para comunicarle a Isabel que había decidido marcharse a París a finales de la semana y que el señor Bantling había prometido ir a despedirla, y puede que incluso la acompañase hasta Dover. Esperaría en París la llegada de Isabel, añadía Henrietta, y por la forma de expresarlo, parecía que Isabel fuese a emprender sola el viaje por el continente, ya que no hacía alusión alguna a la señora Touchett. Teniendo en cuenta el interés que Ralph había mostrado por la que había sido su acompañante en los últimos tiempos, nuestra heroína compartió distintos párrafos de aquella correspondencia con el joven, quien seguía con emoción parecida al suspense la carrera de la corresponsal del *Interviewer*.

—A mí me parece que le está yendo de maravillas —dijo—, ¡irse a París con un antiguo lancero! Si quiere algo sobre lo que escribir, no tiene más que describir ese episodio.

—Desde luego, no es muy convencional —respondió Isabel—, pero si lo que estás diciendo es que, en lo que a Henrietta se refiere, no es algo completamente inocente, te equivocas de medio a medio. Tú jamás entenderás a Henrietta.

—Perdona, pero la entiendo a la perfección. Al principio no la entendía en absoluto, pero ahora conozco su punto de vista. Sin embargo, me temo que no sea así en el caso de Bantling, y que puede que se lleve alguna que otra sorpresa. ¡Yo conozco a Henrietta como si la hubiese creado!

Isabel no estaba en absoluto segura de eso, pero se abstuvo de manifestar de nuevo sus dudas, pues en aquellos días quería mostrarse muy benevolente con su primo. Una tarde, menos de una semana después de la partida de madame Merle, se encontraba sentada en la biblioteca con un volumen al que no prestaba atención. Se había acomodado en el asiento junto al alféizar de la ventana, desde el que se divisaba el parque, húmedo y sombrío; y como la biblioteca se encontraba en ángulo recto con respecto a la entrada, la joven podía ver la berlina del médico, que llevaba dos horas esperando ante la puerta. A Isabel le llamó la atención que se retrasase tanto, pero al fin lo vio aparecer en el pórtico, detenerse un momento para calzarse los guantes despacio mientras miraba las patas de su caballo, para a continuación subirse al vehículo y alejarse. Isabel permaneció allí otra media hora. En la casa reinaba un profundo silencio, tanto que, cuando al fin oyó unos pasos lentos y ligeros sobre la mullida alfombra de la estancia, el ruido casi la sobresaltó. Al volver rápidamente la vista de la ventana, descubrió a Ralph Touchett de pie ante ella, con las manos todavía en los bolsillos, pero con un rostro en el que no quedaba rastro alguno de aquella sonrisa suya habitual. Se puso en pie, y en su movimiento y su mirada había una pregunta.

—Todo ha terminado —dijo Ralph.

—¿Quieres decir que mi tío…?

Isabel no terminó la pregunta.

—Mi querido padre ha muerto hace una hora.

—¡Ay, mi pobre Ralph! —gimió Isabel con suavidad, tendiendo las manos hacia él.

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Un par de semanas después del suceso, llegó madame Merle en un coche de punto a la casa de Winchester Square. Al descender del vehículo, la dama divisó, colgada entre las ventanas del comedor, una gran y pulcra placa de madera en la que, sobre fondo negro, se podía leer con claridad escrito en letras blancas: «Mansión señorial de pleno dominio en venta», seguido del nombre del agente al que había que dirigirse. «Es evidente que no pierden el tiempo —se dijo la visitante mientras, tras haber llamado a la puerta con la enorme aldaba de bronce, esperaba a que le abriesen—, ¡qué prácticos son en este país!» Y una vez en el interior de la casa, cuando subía al salón, advirtió numerosas señales de abandono: cuadros descolgados de las paredes y colocados sobre los sofás, ventanas desprovistas de cortinajes y suelos desnudos. La señora Touchett la recibió y, en pocas palabras, le dio a entender que las condolencias se daban por recibidas.

—Sé lo que me vas a decir: que era un hombre muy bueno. Pero mejor que yo no lo sabe nadie, puesto que conmigo tuvo más oportunidades de demostrarlo. Creo que, en ese sentido, he sido una buena esposa. —La señora Touchett añadió que, al parecer, al final su marido lo había reconocido—. Ha sido de lo más generoso conmigo —dijo —; no digo que se haya mostrado más generoso de lo que yo esperaba, porque yo no albergaba esperanzas concretas. Tú sabes bien que yo en general no espero nada. Pero supongo que él tuvo a bien reconocer el hecho de que, pese a que yo haya vivido mucho en el extranjero y me haya integrado, se puede decir que con total libertad, en la vida de otro país, jamás haya mostrado ni un ápice de interés por nadie más.

«Por nadie que no seas tú», observó madame Merle para sus adentros, aunque dicha reflexión fue completamente inaudible.

—Jamás sacrifiqué a mi esposo por otro —prosiguió la señora Touchett con aquella brusquedad tan suya.

«Oh, no —pensó madame Merle—. Tú jamás has hecho nada por nadie.»

Había un cierto cinismo en aquellas reflexiones calladas que requiere una explicación; tanto más cuanto que no concuerdan ni con la imagen —tal vez un tanto superficial— que hasta el momento se ha dado del personaje de madame Merle ni con los hechos en sí de la historia de la señora Touchett; tanto más, asimismo, cuanto que madame Merle tenía motivos más que fundados para estar convencida de que aquella última observación de su amiga no debía interpretarse en absoluto como un ataque velado contra ella. La verdad es que, desde el mismo momento en que había cruzado el umbral de aquella casa, había tenido la impresión de que la muerte del señor Touchett había tenido sutiles consecuencias, y que estas habían beneficiado a un pequeño círculo de personas en el que ella no estaba incluida. Por supuesto, lo natural era que un acontecimiento de ese calibre tuviese consecuencias, y en más de una ocasión ella misma se había dedicado a imaginarlas durante su estancia en Gardencourt. Pero una cosa era barruntar mentalmente el asunto, y otra muy distinta ver a su alrededor las enormes consecuencias del mismo. La idea de un reparto de bienes —a punto estuvo de llamarlos despojos— se adueñó en aquel momento de sus sentidos y la sensación de verse excluida del mismo la llenó de irritación. Nada más lejos de mi intención que querer describirla como una de esas bocas hambrientas o de esos corazones llenos de envidia propios del común de los mortales, pero, como ya hemos descubierto, madame Merle albergaba deseos que jamás se habían visto satisfechos. De habérselo preguntado, está claro que habría reconocido, con una sonrisa elegante y altanera, que ella no tenía el más mínimo derecho a parte alguna de las reliquias del señor Touchett. «Nunca hubo nada entre nosotros», habría dicho. Y después añadiría chasqueando los dedos: «Ni tanto así, pobre hombre». Me apresuro a añadir asimismo que, si bien en aquel momento era incapaz de evitar una codicia un tanto perversa, se cuidó muy bien de no traicionarla. Al fin y al cabo, las ganancias de la señora Touchett le despertaban la misma simpatía que sus propias pérdidas.

—Me ha dejado esta casa —dijo la recién enviudada—, pero está claro que no voy a vivir en ella; mi casa de Florencia es mucho mejor. Hace apenas tres días que se leyó el testamento, pero ya la he puesto a la venta. También cuento con una participación en el banco, pero aún no tengo claro si estoy obligada a mantenerla. De no ser así, es seguro que la retire. Ralph, como es natural, se queda con Gardencourt, pero no sé muy bien si cuenta con los medios necesarios para mantenerlo. Está claro que ha quedado en muy buena posición, pero su padre ha repartido una cantidad inmensa de dinero: ha dejado legados a un montón de primos lejanos de Vermont. Ralph, por otro lado,

tiene mucho aprecio a Gardencourt y podría vivir allí perfectamente durante el verano, sin más ayuda que una criada para todo y un mozo para el jardín. El testamento de mi marido incluye una cláusula sorprendente —prosiguió la señora Touchett—: le deja una fortuna a mi sobrina.

—¡Una fortuna! —repitió madame Merle en voz baja.

—Isabel va a percibir en torno a unas setenta mil libras.

Madame Merle tenía las manos entrelazadas en el regazo, pero al oír aquello las alzó, todavía unidas, y se las llevó un momento al pecho mientras clavaba los ojos, un tanto dilatados, en los de su amiga.

—¡Ah! —exclamó—. ¡Qué criatura más inteligente!

La señora Touchett le dirigió una rápida mirada.

—¿Qué quieres decir con eso?

Durante un instante, el rostro de madame Merle se cubrió de rubor y la dama bajó la mirada.

—Que es sin duda muy inteligente lograr semejante triunfo… ¡y sin ningún esfuerzo!

—No me cabe ninguna duda de que no hubo esfuerzo. No lo llames triunfo.

Madame Merle en raras ocasiones incurría en la torpeza de retractarse de lo dicho; ponía más bien de manifiesto su sabiduría al mantener sus palabras, pero logrando darles un sentido positivo.

—Mi querida amiga, lo que está claro es que Isabel jamás habría conseguido un legado de setenta mil libras de no haber sido la joven más encantadora del mundo. Su gran inteligencia forma parte de ese encanto.

—Estoy convencida de que ni en sueños pensó que mi esposo fuese a hacer nada por ella, y yo tampoco imaginé nunca algo así, ya que él jamás me habló de sus intenciones —dijo la señora Touchett—. Isabel no tenía derecho alguno a reclamarle nada, y el hecho de que fuese sobrina mía no era precisamente una recomendación para él. Si algo ha logrado, lo ha hecho de forma inconsciente.

—Ah —replicó madame Merle—, esos son los mejores golpes.

La señora Touchett se reservó su opinión.

—Es una joven afortunada, no voy a negarlo, pero de momento está sencillamente anonadada.

—¿Me estás diciendo que no sabe qué hacer con el dinero?

—Creo que eso casi ni se lo ha planteado. No sabe qué pensar de todo este asunto. Es como si hubiesen disparado de improviso una escopeta a sus espaldas: todavía está palpándose para ver si la han herido. Solo hace tres días desde que recibió la visita del albacea principal, quien de forma muy galante vino a notificárselo en persona. Él me contó después que, cuando terminó su breve discurso, Isabel se había echado a llorar. El dinero seguirá invertido en el banco, y ella percibirá los intereses.

Madame Merle meneó la cabeza con su sabia y ahora benigna sonrisa.

—¡Oh, qué delicia! Cuando lo haya hecho dos o tres veces, se acostumbrará a ello. —Después, tras un silencio, preguntó con brusquedad—: ¿Qué opina su hijo del asunto?

—Abandonó Inglaterra antes de la lectura del testamento; estaba destrozado por la fatiga y la ansiedad y tenía prisa por marcharse al sur. Va camino de la Riviera y todavía no he recibido noticias suyas. Pero no es probable que ponga objeciones a algo que ha hecho su padre.

—¿No me acaba de decir que su herencia se había visto reducida?

—Sí, pero por deseo suyo. Me consta que instó a su padre a que dejara algo a los parientes de Estados Unidos. No es persona dada a preocuparse de quién es el primero.

—Eso dependerá de quién considere él que es el primero —dijo madame Merle. Luego se quedó un momento pensativa, con la mirada clavada en el suelo—. ¿Es que no voy a poder ver a su afortunada sobrina? —preguntó al fin cuando alzó la vista.

—Puede verla, pero no va a encontrarla muy feliz. Desde hace tres días tiene un aire tan solemne que parece una madonna de Cimabue.

Y la señora Touchett hizo sonar la campanilla para que acudiese un criado.

Isabel se presentó poco después de que el sirviente fuese a buscarla, y madame Merle, al verla aparecer, pensó que la comparación de la señora Touchett no iba del todo descaminada. La joven estaba pálida y seria, aspecto que no se veía precisamente mitigado por el luto riguroso con el que iba vestida, pero aquella sonrisa suya de los momentos más alegres iluminó su rostro al ver a madame Merle, quien se acercó a ella, posó la mano en el hombro de nuestra heroína y, tras contemplarla un instante, la besó como si estuviese devolviéndole el beso que ella le había dado en Gardencourt. Esta fue la única alusión que la visitante, dando muestra de su exquisito tacto, hizo por el momento a la

herencia recibida por su joven amiga.

La señora Touchett no tenía intención de esperar en Londres a que se vendiese la casa. Después de elegir entre el mobiliario los objetos que deseaba llevarse a su otra residencia, dejó el resto de los enseres para que se vendiesen en subasta pública, y partió hacia el continente. Como es natural, en el viaje la acompañaba su sobrina, quien ahora disponía del tiempo necesario para sopesar y ponderar, y para decidir qué hacer con aquella fortuna que le había caído del cielo y por la que madame Merle la había felicitado de forma velada. Isabel pensaba con mucha frecuencia en el hecho de haber entrado en posesión de tantos recursos, y lo analizaba desde una decena de perspectivas distintas; pero no vamos a tratar por el momento de seguir el hilo de sus pensamientos ni de explicar con exactitud por qué la idea de su nueva situación le resultó en un principio agobiante. Lo cierto es que esa incapacidad de sentir una alegría inmediata fue más bien breve: la joven se convenció enseguida de que la riqueza era una virtud porque representaba la posibilidad de actuar, y eso no podía ser sino algo agradable. Era el lado contrario y encantador de la estúpida debilidad… sobre todo en su vertiente femenina. Ser débil, en el caso de una persona joven y delicada, no carecía de encanto, pero, después de todo, como Isabel se decía a sí misma, había otros encantos mayores que ese. La verdad era que por el momento, tras haberle enviado un cheque a Lily y otro a la pobre Edith, no tenía gran cosa que hacer, pero agradecía aquellos meses tranquilos que su ropa de luto y la reciente viudedad de su tía les obligaban a pasar juntas. La conciencia de poder la tornó seria: examinaba ese poder con una especie de fiereza no exenta de ternura, pero no se sentía impaciente por ejercitarlo. Comenzó a hacerlo pasado un tiempo, en el transcurso de una estancia en París de varias semanas en compañía de su tía, aunque de formas que inevitablemente resultaban triviales. Lo hizo de la manera más natural, siguiendo el dictado de una ciudad cuyas tiendas son la admiración del mundo, y aconsejada sin reservas por la señora Touchett, quien adoptó una rígida y práctica postura con respecto a la transformación de su sobrina de joven pobre en joven rica. «Ahora que eres una joven con fortuna, tienes que saber desempeñar tu papel… me refiero a desempeñarlo bien», le dijo a Isabel de manera tajante, y añadió que la primera obligación de la joven era tener cosas bonitas. «Tú no sabes cómo cuidar de tus cosas, pero debes aprender a hacerlo», añadió, y dijo que esta era la segunda obligación de Isabel. La joven la obedeció, pero por el momento su imaginación no se vio estimulada. Anhelaba tener oportunidades, pero no eran aquellas las que ella buscaba.

La señora Touchett rara vez alteraba sus planes, y, como con anterioridad al fallecimiento de su marido había sido su intención, pasar parte del invierno en París, no vio razón alguna para privarse a sí misma, y menos aún a su acompañante, de aquel placer. Aunque iban a llevar una vida de lo más retirada, todavía tenía la posibilidad de presentar a su sobrina, sin ceremonias, al reducido círculo de compatriotas suyos que habitaban en las proximidades de los Campos Elíseos. Mantenía amistad íntima con muchos de aquellos encantadores forasteros, con los cuales compartía expatriación, convicciones, pasatiempos y tedio. Isabel los veía aparecer con mucha asiduidad por el hotel de su tía, y la severidad con la que los juzgaba era tal que, no cabe la menor duda, solo puede explicarse por aquella exaltación pasajera de lo que ella consideraba deber del ser humano. Llegó al convencimiento de que las vidas de aquella gente, aunque lujosas, eran inanes, y se granjeó cierta animosidad al expresar dicha opinión en las alegres tardes de domingo en que aquellos estadounidenses expatriados se dedicaban a visitarse unos a otros. Pese a que sus interlocutores eran tenidos por un dechado de urbanidad gracias a los desvelos de sus cocineros y modistas, dos o tres de ellos opinaban que la inteligencia de Isabel, en general reconocida, era inferior a la de las obras teatrales recién estrenadas.

—Viven todos ustedes aquí de esta forma… pero ¿adónde les conduce? —se complacía en preguntar Isabel—. A mí no me parece que conduzca a ninguna parte, y creo que muy pronto se cansarán de ella.

A la señora Touchett aquella le parecía una pregunta propia de Henrietta Stackpole. Las dos damas se habían encontrado con Henrietta en París, e Isabel se veía con ella constantemente, por lo tanto, la señora Touchett no iba del todo desencaminada cuando se decía para sus adentros que, si su sobrina no fuese lo suficientemente inteligente para mostrarse original en casi todo, cabría sospechar que había tomado prestado de su amiga periodista aquel tipo de comentarios. La primera ocasión en la que Isabel había hablado así fue en el transcurso de una visita que hicieron ambas damas a la señora Luce, una vieja amiga de la señora Touchett y la única persona en París a la que ahora iba a visitar. La señora Luce vivía en París desde la época de Luis Felipe, y solía decir en tono jocoso que pertenecía a la generación de 1830, broma cuyo sentido no siempre se entendía. Cuando eso sucedía, la explicación de la señora Luce era: «Oh, sí, yo soy una de las románticas». Jamás había logrado dominar el francés por completo. Siempre se encontraba en casa los domingos por la tarde, y rodeada de complacientes compatriotas que solían ser siempre los mismos. De hecho se encontraba en casa a todas horas, y en aquel confortable rincón de la deslumbrante ciudad

reproducía con maravillosa exactitud el ambiente doméstico de su Baltimore natal. Eso reducía el papel del señor Luce, su dignísimo esposo —un caballero alto, enjuto, de pelo cano y muy atildado, que usaba un monóculo de oro y llevaba el sombrero un tanto echado hacia atrás—, a la mera alabanza platónica de las «distracciones» de París, como él las denominaba, ya que uno jamás habría adivinado de qué ocupaciones escapaba para ir a refugiarse en ellas. Una de ellas consistía en acudir todos los días al banco americano, donde había descubierto una oficina postal que era una institución con un ambiente casi tan agradable y familiar como el de cualquier ciudad de su país. Cuando hacía buen tiempo, se pasaba una hora en una silla de los Campos Elíseos, para después irse a cenar extraordinariamente bien a su propia mesa, dispuesta sobre un suelo encerado que era motivo de orgullo para la señora Luce al creer que no había otro más pulido en toda la capital de Francia. De vez en cuando cenaba con uno o dos amigos en el Café Anglais, donde su talento para escoger el menú era celebrado por sus acompañantes y causa de admiración incluso para el maître del establecimiento. Tales eran sus únicos pasatiempos conocidos, pero habían ocupado sus horas desde hacía más de medio siglo y sin duda justificaban su frecuente declaración de que no había un sitio como París. En ningún otro lugar, dadas las circunstancias, habría podido el señor Luce presumir de estar disfrutando de la vida. No había nada como París, pero es preciso confesar que el señor Luce tenía ahora una opinión del escenario de su disipación menos favorable que en sus primeros tiempos. De la lista de sus recursos no podemos omitir sus reflexiones políticas, ya que eran sin duda alguna el motor que animaba muchas de aquellas horas que, a primera vista, podrían parecer vacuas. Al igual que muchos de sus compañeros expatriados, el señor Luce era un auténtico conservador, o mejor dicho, un conservador de los pies a la cabeza, y no daba su aprobación al gobierno que recientemente se había establecido en Francia. No tenía fe en que durase y, año tras año, aseguraba que su final estaba próximo. «Lo que necesitan es que los mantengan a raya, señor, bien a raya. Lo único que funciona con ellos es la mano dura, la bota de hierro», decía con frecuencia al hablar del pueblo francés, y su ideal de lo que debía ser un gobierno inteligente y acertado era el desaparecido Imperio. «París es un lugar mucho menos atractivo que en los tiempos del emperador, él sí que sabía hacer agradable esta ciudad», le comentaba con frecuencia a la señora Touchett, quien era de la misma opinión y quería saber qué otra razón podía haber para cruzar el odioso Atlántico si no era para huir de las repúblicas.

—Fíjese, señora, sentado en los Campos Elíseos, frente al Palacio de la Industria, yo he visto pasar arriba y abajo los carruajes de la corte procedentes de las Tullerías hasta siete veces al día. Recuerdo una ocasión en que llegaron a pasar nueve veces. ¿Y ahora qué se ve? No merece la pena mencionarlo, el estilo ha desaparecido. Napoleón sabía lo que los franceses necesitan, y una nube negra cubrirá París, nuestro París, hasta que se instaure de nuevo el Imperio.

Entre los asistentes a las veladas dominicales de la señora Luce había un joven con el que Isabel había mantenido largas conversaciones y a quien consideraba lleno de valiosos conocimientos. El señor Edward Rosier, conocido como Ned Rosier, era originario de Nueva York pero había crecido en París bajo la atenta mirada de su padre que, casualidades de la vida, había sido amigo íntimo desde la infancia del difunto señor Archer. Edward Rosier se acordaba de Isabel cuando era una niña pequeña; de hecho, había sido su padre el que socorrió a las pequeñas Archer en la posada de Neufchâtel (pasaba por el lugar cuando iba de viaje con su hijo y el azar hizo que parase en el mismo hotel) cuando la institutriz francesa de las niñas se había fugado con el príncipe ruso, y cuando durante varios días el señor Archer estuvo en paradero desconocido.

Isabel recordaba perfectamente a aquel pulcro muchachito cuyos cabellos desprendían un delicioso olor a cosmético y que tenía una *bonne* para él solo, a la que le habían encomendado no perderlo de vista bajo ningún pretexto. Isabel dio un paseo con ambos por las orillas del lago y pensó que el pequeño Edward era tan lindo como un ángel, comparación que para ella no era nada convencional, pues tenía un concepto bien definido del tipo de rasgos que conforman un semblante angelical, y su nuevo amigo era un perfecto exponente de los mismos. Una carita sonrosada, coronada por un gorro de terciopelo azul y resaltada por una tiesa gorguera bordada, se había convertido en el rostro de sus sueños de niña; y, durante un tiempo después, había creído firmemente que los moradores celestiales conversaban entre ellos en un extraño dialecto mezcla de inglés y francés con el que expresaban sus más bellos sentimientos; como, por ejemplo, cuando Edward le había dicho que su *bonne* le «había defendido» acercarse al borde del lago y que siempre había que obedecer a la *bonne* de uno. El inglés de Ned Rosier había mejorado o, al menos, ya no mostraba tantas interferencias del francés. Su padre había muerto y se había prescindido de los servicios de la *bonne*, pero el joven seguía fiel al espíritu de las enseñanzas recibidas de ambos y nunca se acercaba a la orilla del lago. Seguía habiendo en él algo que resultaba placentero al olfato y que no desagradaba a los sentidos más nobles. Era un joven muy gentil y agraciado, con lo que suele llamarse gustos cultivados… conocedor de la

porcelana antigua, de los buenos vinos, de las encuadernaciones de los libros, del Almanaque de Gotha, de las mejores tiendas y los mejores hoteles, de los horarios de los trenes. Era tan bueno eligiendo el menú de una cena como el señor Luce y lo más probable parecía que, cuando acumulase experiencia, se convirtiese en digno sucesor de aquel caballero, cuyas opiniones políticas un tanto lúgubres también defendía con voz suave e inocente. Tenía unos aposentos encantadores en París, decorados con antiguos encajes españoles de iglesia que eran la envidia de sus amigas, quienes decían que la repisa de su chimenea estaba mejor cubierta que los hombros de muchas duquesas. Por lo general, pasaba parte del invierno en Pau y en una ocasión había vivido dos meses en Estados Unidos.

Edward se interesó mucho por Isabel y se acordaba perfectamente del paseo por Neufchatel y de cómo ella se empeñaba en acercarse a la orilla del lago. Le pareció reconocer aquella misma tendencia en la cuestión subversiva que he mencionado hace un momento y se dispuso a responder a la pregunta de nuestra heroína con una cortesía tal vez mayor de la que la misma merecía.

—¿Qué adónde conduce, señorita Archer? Está claro que París conduce a todas partes. No se puede llegar a ningún sitio sin antes haber pasado por París. Todo el que viene a Europa tiene que pasar por aquí. ¿Qué no lo dice tan solo en este sentido? ¿Se refiere usted a qué bien puede hacerle a uno? Es que, ¿es acaso posible adivinar el futuro? ¿Cómo puede saberse lo que nos depara? Si el camino es placentero, a mí no me importa adónde me conduzca. A mí me gusta el camino, señorita Archer, el viejo y querido asfalto. Es imposible llegar a cansarse de él… por mucho que uno se empeñe. Usted se figura que se hartaría, pero no es así: siempre hay algo nuevo por descubrir. Ahí tiene, por ejemplo, la casa Drouot. A veces celebran tres y hasta cuatro subastas en una misma semana. ¿En qué otro lugar puede usted encontrar las cosas que se pueden conseguir aquí? Y, pese a todo lo que digan, sostengo que además son más baratas, si se sabe el sitio adecuado. Yo conozco muchos sitios, pero me los guardo para mí. Si quiere, se los enseñaré a usted, pero solo como un favor especial y a condición de que no se lo diga a nadie más. No se le ocurra ir a ningún sitio sin preguntarme a mí antes, quiero que me lo prometa. Como regla general, evite los bulevares lo más posible, hay muy poco que hacer allí. Sinceramente hablando, *sans blague*, no creo que haya nadie que conozca París mejor que yo. Usted y la señora Touchett deben venir a almorzar algún día conmigo y les mostraré mis cosas; *je ne vous dis que ça*! Últimamente se habla mucho de Londres, está de moda poner Londres por las nubes. Pero la verdad es que no hay color, que en Londres no hay nada. No hay estilo Luis XV, ni nada del Primer Imperio… nada aparte de ese eterno Reina Ana, que está muy bien para la alcoba, o para el cuarto de aseo, pero que no es adecuado para un salón. ¿Que si me paso la vida en las subastas? —prosiguió el señor Rosier en respuesta a otra pregunta que le hiciera Isabel—. No, qué va, no tengo los medios. ¡Ojalá los tuviera! Usted se figura que soy un frívolo, lo estoy viendo en la expresión de su cara. Tiene usted un rostro de lo más expresivo. Espero que no le importe que se lo diga, es una especie de advertencia. Usted cree que yo debería hacer algo y yo opino lo mismo, siempre y cuando se quede en vaguedades. Porque si se llega al meollo de la cuestión, habrá que dejarlo. Yo no puedo volver a nuestro país y ser comerciante. ¿Cree que estoy dotado para ello? Ay, mi querida señorita Archer, me sobreestima usted. Soy muy bueno comprando, pero no sé vender; tendría usted que verme en las ocasiones en que intento deshacerme de alguna de mis cosas. Se precisa mucha más habilidad para hacer comprar a los demás que para comprar uno mismo. ¡Cuando pienso lo inteligentes que deben de ser los que consiguen hacerme comprar algo. ¡Ah, no! Yo no podría de ninguna manera ser comerciante. Tampoco puedo ser médico, es una profesión repulsiva. No puedo ser clérigo, carezco de vocación. Y, además, soy incapaz de pronunciar bien los nombres de la Biblia. Son muy difíciles, sobre todo los del Antiguo Testamento. No puedo ser abogado, porque no entiendo el… ¿cómo se llama?… el *procédure* estadounidense. ¿Hay algo más? Nada. Para un caballero, en Estados Unidos no hay nada que hacer. Me agradaría ser diplomático, pero la diplomacia estadounidense tampoco es que sea para caballeros. Estoy seguro de que si hubiera visto usted la última mi…

Henrietta Stackpole, quien a menudo se encontraba en compañía de su amiga cuando el señor Rosier, al ir a visitarla a última hora de la tarde, se expresaba de la forma que acabo de esbozar, solía interrumpir al joven al llegar a ese punto para soltarle un sermón sobre los deberes del ciudadano estadounidense. En su opinión el señor Rosier era una persona muy poco natural, incluso peor que el pobre Ralph Touchett. No obstante, por aquella época, Henrietta era más dada que nunca a hacer duras críticas, porque su conciencia se había visto de nuevo removida con respecto a Isabel. No había felicitado a la joven por su nueva fortuna y le había rogado que la excusara de hacerlo.

—Si el señor Touchett me hubiese consultado sobre si debía dejarte ese dinero —declaró con toda franqueza—, yo le habría dicho: «¡Jamás!».

—Ya veo —había respondido Isabel—. Crees que, en cierto modo, esto será como una maldición encubierta para

mí. Tal vez lo sea.

—Déjeselo a otra persona por la que sienta menos aprecio… eso es lo que le habría dicho.

—¿A ti, por ejemplo? —preguntó Isabel bromeando, para añadir en tono más serio—: ¿De verdad crees que esto será mi perdición?

—Espero que no sea así, pero lo que está claro es que va a confirmar tus peligrosas inclinaciones.

—¿Hablas del gusto por el lujo… del derroche?

—No, no —dijo Henrietta—, me estoy refiriendo a la parte vulnerable de tu moral. Yo apruebo el lujo, creo que debemos ser tan elegantes como podamos. Piensa en el lujo de las ciudades del oeste de nuestro país, yo no he visto nada aquí que sea comparable. Espero que jamás te vuelvas sensual hasta la vulgaridad, pero no es eso lo que temo. El peligro para ti reside en que vives demasiado inmersa en el mundo de tus propios sueños. En que no mantienes suficiente contacto con la realidad, con el trabajo, la lucha, el sufrimiento, incluso diría el pecado, del mundo que te rodea. Eres demasiado refinada, albergas demasiadas ilusiones de elegancia. La fortuna que acabas de adquirir te aislará cada vez más y tus relaciones se limitarán a un grupo de gente egoísta y sin corazón a la que lo único que le interesará será tu dinero.

Los ojos de Isabel se abrieron como platos al imaginarse tan terrible escena.

—¿Y cuáles son esas ilusiones mías? —preguntó—. Yo me esfuerzo cuanto puedo por no tenerlas.

—Pues verás —respondió Henrietta—, crees que puedes llevar una vida romántica, que puedes vivir complaciéndote a ti misma y complaciendo a los demás. Y vas a descubrir hasta qué punto estás equivocada. No importa el tipo de vida que lleves: para que las cosas salgan medianamente bien, es necesario poner el alma en ella; y en el momento en que lo haces, el romanticismo desaparece, te lo aseguro, y se convierte en la cruda realidad. Y no puedes complacerte siempre a ti misma, a veces es necesario complacer a los demás. Reconozco que eso tú estás muy dispuesta a hacerlo, pero hay otra cosa que es aún más importante: a menudo hay que contrariar a los demás. Y hay que estar siempre dispuesta a hacerlo, y no tratar de evitarlo. Y eso es algo que a ti no te va en absoluto: te gusta demasiado que te admiren y que tengan buena opinión de ti. Crees que uno puede escabullirse de las obligaciones desagradables adoptando ideas románticas: esa es tu mayor ilusión, mi querida amiga. Pero eso es imposible. En la vida existen numerosas ocasiones en la que hay que estar preparada para no complacer a nadie… ni siquiera a una misma.

Isabel meneó la cabeza con tristeza. Parecía preocupada y asustada.

—Y para ti, Henrietta, esta debe de ser una de esas ocasiones de las que hablas.

Era sin duda cierto que la señorita Stackpole, durante su visita a París, que profesionalmente le había resultado más fructífera que la estancia en Inglaterra, no había estado habitando en el mundo de los sueños. El señor Bantling, que ahora ya había regresado a Inglaterra, había sido su acompañante durante las primeras cuatro semanas en la ciudad; y cabe decir que el señor Bantling de soñador no tenía nada. Isabel supo por su amiga que la relación personal entre ambos había sido muy íntima, lo que había redundado en beneficio de Henrietta, pues el conocimiento que de París tenía el caballero era grande. Se lo había explicado todo, se lo había mostrado todo, había sido su guía, su intérprete constante. Habían desayunado juntos, almorzado juntos, asistido juntos al teatro, cenado juntos; en realidad, habían vivido en cierta manera juntos. Bantling era un amigo de verdad, le aseguró Henrietta en más de una ocasión a nuestra heroína, y ella jamás habría imaginado que un inglés pudiera llegar a gustarle tanto. Isabel no habría sabido explicar el porqué, pero en aquella alianza establecida entre la corresponsal del *Interviewer* y el hermano de lady Pensil encontraba algo que despertaba su hilaridad; es más, lo divertido del asunto persistía aun frente al hecho de que dicha alianza los honraba a ambos. Isabel no conseguía librarse de la sospecha de que ninguno de los dos comprendía hasta cierto punto los propósitos del otro, de que la ingenuidad de ambos los había hecho caer en una trampa. Pero no por ello era menos honorable la ingenuidad de ambas partes. Tan admirable resultaba el hecho de que Henrietta creyera que el señor Bantling estaba interesado en la difusión del periodismo ameno y en la consolidación de la posición de las corresponsales femeninas, como el de que el caballero imaginase que la causa del *Interviewer* (publicación sobre la que él jamás llegó a formarse una idea muy definida) no era otra cosa, si se la analizaba con sutileza (tarea para la que el señor Bantling se sentía perfectamente capacitado), que la necesidad que tenía la señorita Stackpole de que le demostrasen afecto. En todo caso, cada uno de aquellos dos solteros inseguros llenaba un vacío del que el otro era dolorosamente consciente. El señor Bantling, que era de naturaleza más bien lenta y discursiva, disfrutaba con una mujer vivaz, entusiasta y positiva, que lo encandilaba con su visión brillante e inquisitiva y con una especie de frescura prístina, y que avivaba en su espíritu, al que el habitual menú que la vida

ofrecía resultaba insípido, la percepción de lo picante. Henrietta, por su parte, disfrutaba de la compañía de un caballero que, a su manera (gracias a procesos costosos, indirectos y casi pintorescos), parecía hecho a propósito para ella, un hombre cuya situación ociosa, aunque indefendible en general, constituía una auténtica bendición para una compañera infatigable, y que era alguien que siempre tenía una respuesta pronta, tradicional, aunque de ningún modo exhaustiva, ante cualquier cuestión social o práctica que pudiese surgir. Encontraba a menudo muy acertadas las respuestas del señor Bantling, y en su apresuramiento por tener listas las crónicas para enviarlas por correo a Estados Unidos, hacía uso abundante y público de dicha fuente. Era de temer que estuviese de hecho deslizándose hacia aquellos abismos de sofisticación contra los que Isabel, buscando una réplica graciosa, la había puesto en guardia. Tal vez el peligro acechase a Isabel, pero, por lo que respectaba a la señorita Stackpole, era del todo improbable que acabase encontrando acomodo permanente en la adopción de las ideas de una clase empeñada en cometer los abusos de siempre. Isabel continuaba poniéndola en guardia con buen humor, y el atento hermano de lady Pensil era a veces, en labios de nuestra heroína, objeto de alusiones burlonas e irreverentes. No había nada, sin embargo, capaz de superar la afabilidad de Henrietta al respecto, ya que acostumbraba a sumarse a los irónicos comentarios de Isabel y a referir con regocijo las horas que había pasado en compañía de aquel perfecto hombre de mundo… un término que para ella había dejado de tener el sentido peyorativo de antes. Luego, al cabo de solo unos momentos, se olvidaba de que habían estado hablando en tono jocoso y mencionaba con auténtico entusiasmo alguna excursión realizada en compañía del caballero en cuestión.

—Ah, me conozco Versalles de memoria. Fui con el señor Bantling. Yo iba dispuesta a verlo a fondo y antes de ir le advertí de que era extremadamente concienzuda. Así que nos alojamos tres días en un hotel y nos dedicamos a recorrer todos los rincones del lugar. Hacía un tiempo delicioso, una especie de veranillo de San Martín, aunque no tan bueno. Vivíamos prácticamente en aquellos jardines. No, no hay nada de Versalles que yo no sepa.

Al parecer, Henrietta había acordado reunirse en primavera con su galante amigo en Italia.

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Ya antes de llegar a París, la señora Touchett había fijado la fecha de su partida, y a mediados de febrero había emprendido el trayecto hacia el sur. Interrumpió el viaje para hacer una visita a su hijo, quien había estado pasando un invierno soleado y aburrido en San Remo, en la costa mediterránea de Italia bajo una sombrilla blanca que apenas se mecía. Isabel, como era de esperar, acompañaba a su tía, pese a que la señora Touchett, con su lógica acostumbrada, le había propuesto un par de alternativas.

—Ahora, está claro, eres dueña absoluta de tu destino y libre como un pájaro. No estoy diciendo que antes no lo fueras, pero tu situación presente es distinta: la riqueza establece una especie de barrera. Cuando uno es rico puede hacer muchas cosas que de ser pobre recibiría severas críticas. Puedes ir y venir a tu antojo, viajar sola, establecer tu propia residencia: siempre, claro está, que te busques una acompañante, una dama venida a menos, de abrigo raído y pelo teñido, y que pinte sobre terciopelo. ¿No crees que eso te agradase? Naturalmente, puedes hacer lo que te plazca. Lo único que quiero es que entiendas hasta qué punto eres libre. Podrías tomar a la señorita Stackpole como *dame de compagnie*: ella sabría muy bien mantener a la gente a distancia. Sin embargo, creo que sería mucho mejor que continuases a mi lado, aunque no tengas obligación alguna. Sería mejor por varias razones, dejando aparte que sea o no de tu agrado. Yo creo que no lo sería, pero te recomiendo que hagas el sacrificio. Está claro que la novedad que en un principio podría haber representado mi compañía ya habrá desaparecido por completo, y que me ves tal como soy: una anciana terca, aburrida y estrecha de miras.

—Yo no la encuentro aburrida en absoluto —había respondido Isabel ante aquellas palabras.

—Pero ¿sí me crees terca y estrecha de miras? ¡Ya te lo he dicho…! —exclamó la señora Touchett, encantada de estar en lo cierto.

Isabel continuaba de momento con su tía, porque, pese a sus propios impulsos excéntricos, sentía gran respeto por lo que normalmente se consideraba decente, y una joven dama sin parientes conocidos siempre le había parecido una flor sin pétalos. Era cierto que la conversación de la señora Touchett no había vuelto a parecerle tan deslumbrante como aquella primera tarde en Albany, cuando se había sentado sin despojarse del impermeable mojado y había enumerado las oportunidades que Europa ofrecía a una joven de buen gusto. Sin embargo, aquello había sido en gran medida culpa de la propia Isabel, ya que había visto solo retazos de la experiencia de su tía y había anticipado en su imaginación las opiniones y emociones de una mujer tan desprovista de dicha facultad. Aparte de esto, la señora Touchett contaba con un gran mérito: era recta como un huso. Su rigidez y su firmeza resultaban reconfortantes, uno sabía con exactitud dónde encontrarla y no corría el riesgo de tropiezos ni encontronazos. Estaba siempre muy presente en su propio terreno, pero jamás mostraba excesiva curiosidad por el terreno de su prójimo. Isabel, al final, llegó a sentir por ella una especie de lástima inefable, pues parecía que hubiese algo terriblemente triste en la condición de una persona cuya naturaleza, por así decirlo, ofrecía una superficie tan limitada, un espacio tan reducido, a las posibilidades del contacto humano. Nada mínimamente tierno ni compasivo había tenido jamás oportunidad de arraigar en ella, ni simiente alguna traída por el viento ni el musgo suave de lo familiar. En otras palabras, la superficie pasiva que ofrecía a los demás tenía más o menos el ancho del filo de una navaja. Sin embargo, Isabel tenía razones para creer que, a medida que avanzaba en edad, su tía iba haciendo más concesiones a algo confusamente distinto a la conveniencia… y más de las que por su parte se permitiría. Estaba aprendiendo a sacrificar la coherencia a consideraciones de orden inferior, para las que había que encontrar excusa en cada caso particular. No era precisamente muestra de aquella inflexibilidad suya el hecho de que hubiese elegido el camino más largo a Florencia a fin de pasar unas cuantas semanas con su hijo enfermo, ya que en años anteriores una de sus convicciones más firmes había sido la de que si Ralph quería verla, no tenía más que recordar que en el palazzo Crescentini había un amplio apartamento con el nombre de los aposentos del signorino.

—Hay algo que quiero preguntarte —le dijo Isabel al joven al día siguiente de su llegada a San Remo—. Es algo que en más de una ocasión he pensado en preguntarte por carta, pero que no acababa de decidirme a poner por escrito. Cara a cara, sin embargo, la pregunta no me resulta tan difícil. ¿Estabas enterado de que tu padre tenía intención de dejarme tanto dinero?

Ralph estiró las largas piernas un poco más de lo normal y miró hacia el Mediterráneo con un poco más de intensidad.

—¿Qué importa, querida Isabel, si estaba enterado? Mi padre era un hombre muy terco y obstinado.

—O sea que sí que lo sabías —dijo la joven.

—Sí, mi padre me lo contó. Hasta hablamos un poco del asunto.

—¿Por qué lo hizo? —preguntó Isabel con brusquedad.

—Bueno, imagino que fue como una especie de cumplido.

—¿Un cumplido a qué?

—A lo hermoso que es que existas.

—Me tenía demasiado cariño.

—Eso nos pasa a todos.

—Si creyese tal cosa, sería muy desgraciada. Por fortuna, no me lo creo. Quiero que se me trate con justicia. No deseo otra cosa.

—Muy bien, pero no debes olvidar que hacer justicia a un ser encantador es, al fin y al cabo, un sentimiento más bien retórico.

—Yo no soy un ser encantador. ¿Cómo puedes decirme eso justo cuando te estoy haciendo preguntas tan odiosas? ¡Debo de parecerte muy delicada!

—Lo que me pareces es preocupada —dijo Ralph.

—Estoy preocupada.

—¿Por qué razón?

Por un instante, Isabel no dijo nada; luego saltó:

—¿Crees que es bueno para mí haberme vuelto tan rica de repente? Henrietta opina que no.

—¡Pues que la zurzan a Henrietta! —exclamó Ralph con ordinariez—. Si quieres saber mi opinión, te diré que yo estoy encantado.

—¿Lo hizo tu padre por esa razón… para que tú estuvieses contento?

—A diferencia de la señorita Stackpole —añadió Ralph ya más en serio—, yo creo que es bueno para ti contar con medios.

Isabel lo contempló con mirada seria.

—Yo me pregunto si sabes lo que es bueno para mí… o si te importa.

—Sé qué te conviene, y puedes estar segura de que me importa. ¿Quieres que te diga de qué se trata? De que dejes de atormentarte.

—De que deje de atormentarte a ti, querrás decir.

—Eso no está en tus manos; yo soy la prueba. Tómate las cosas con más calma. No te preguntes tanto si esto o lo de más allá es bueno para ti. No interrogues tanto a tu conciencia, o acabará desafinada como un piano aporreado. Resérvalo para las ocasiones importantes. No te empeñes tanto en forjar tu carácter, es igual que tratar de abrir de golpe una rosa joven y prieta. Vive como más te agrade, y ya se encargará tu carácter de forjarse él solo. Mucho de lo que te ocurre es bueno para ti; son contadas las excepciones, y disfrutar de una buena renta no es una de ellas. —Ralph se interrumpió, sonriente. Isabel había estado escuchándolo con atención—. Tienes demasiada capacidad para pensar; sobre todo, demasiada conciencia —añadió—. Es increíble la cantidad de cosas que te parecen mal. No analices tanto. Purga tu fiebre. Extiende las alas y despega del suelo. No hay nada malo en ello.

Como digo, Isabel lo había estado escuchando con mucha atención, y formaba parte de su naturaleza entender con rapidez.

—Me pregunto si te das cuenta de lo que dices, porque, si es así, estás asumiendo una gran responsabilidad.

—Me asustas un poco, pero creo que tengo razón —dijo Ralph, sin perder el buen humor.

—De todas formas, lo que dices es muy cierto —insistió Isabel—. No podrías haber dicho una verdad mayor. Estoy completamente ensimismada, veo la vida como si fuera un remedio prescrito por un médico. ¿Por qué razón tenemos que plantearnos sin cesar si las cosas nos convienen o no, como si fuésemos pacientes internados en un hospital? ¿Por qué habría de tener tanto temor a no hacer lo correcto? ¡Cómo si al mundo le importase que yo acierte o me equivoque!

—Da gusto aconsejar a alguien como tú —dijo Ralph—. ¡Me dejas sin argumentos!

Isabel lo miró como si no hubiese oído, aunque seguía el hilo de los pensamientos que él había iniciado.

—Yo intento preocuparme más del resto del mundo que de mí misma, pero siempre acabo volviendo a mí. Y es porque tengo miedo. —Se detuvo porque le temblaba un poco la voz—. Sí, no sabes hasta qué punto tengo miedo. Una gran fortuna implica libertad, y eso me asusta. Es algo maravilloso, y debería sacársele el mayor rendimiento posible. De no hacerlo así, habría que sentirse avergonzado. Y es algo en lo que hay que pensar todo el tiempo; es un esfuerzo constante. No estoy segura de si no sería una bendición mayor no tener tanto poder.

—Yo no dudo de que para los débiles sea una mayor bendición. Para las personas débiles el esfuerzo necesario para no ganarse el desdén debe de ser enorme.

—¿Y cómo sabes tú que yo no soy débil? —preguntó Isabel.

—Ah —respondió Ralph con un rubor que no pasó inadvertido para la joven—, si lo fueras, me habría equivocado por completo.

El encanto de la costa mediterránea no hizo sino aumentar para nuestra heroína con el paso de los días, pues era el umbral de Italia, la puerta a la fascinación. Italia, todavía escasamente sentida y entrevista, se abría ante ella como una tierra de promisión, una tierra en la que el amor a la belleza podía verse saciado por un conocimiento infinito. Cada vez que paseaba con su primo por la orilla del mar (lo acompañaba en su paseo diario), dirigía la mirada con anhelo a lo lejos, hacia donde sabía que se encontraba Génova. Se alegraba, sin embargo, de hacer un alto justo antes de adentrarse en aquella aventura más grandiosa, pues hasta aquel preámbulo, aquella espera, le resultaba emocionante. Se le antojaba un interludio apacible, como si hubiesen enmudecido los tambores y pífanos que acompañaban una carrera que de momento tenía pocas razones para considerar agitada, pero que, pese a todo, imaginaba sin cesar a través del prisma de sus anhelos, sus miedos, sus fantasías, sus ambiciones, sus predilecciones, y que reflejaba con suficiente dramatismo todos esos elementos subjetivos. Madame Merle le había pronosticado a la señora Touchett que, cuando su joven amiga hubiera metido la mano en el bolsillo una media docena de veces, se reconciliaría con la idea de que un tío muy espléndido se lo había llenado, y los hechos daban fe, como a menudo había sucedido en el pasado, de la perspicacia de la dama. Ralph Touchett había alabado a su prima por su moral tan receptiva, es decir, por la rapidez con la que asumía cualquier sugerencia que se le hiciese a modo de buen consejo. Tal vez los consejos del joven influyesen en la cuestión, pero, de cualquier forma, antes de partir de San Remo, Isabel se había acostumbrado ya a sentirse rica. La conciencia de tal situación se hizo un hueco entre un pequeño y denso grupo de ideas que la joven albergaba con respecto a sí misma, y, por lo general, no le resultaba precisamente desagradable. Dicho convencimiento daba siempre por sentado toda una serie de buenas intenciones. Isabel se sumergió en un laberinto de visiones y, examinadas en su conjunto, resultaba sublime la de cosas maravillosas que podía hacer una joven rica, independiente y generosa, que contaba con una perspectiva muy humana de las oportunidades y las obligaciones. Su fortuna pasó así a formar parte de lo mejor de su ser: le proporcionaba importancia e incluso, a su manera de ver, le confería cierta belleza ideal. Ahora bien, el efecto que en opinión de los demás la riqueza producía en ella es harina de otro costal, y a él nos referiremos a su debido tiempo. Las visiones a las que acabo de referirme se entremezclaban con otros dilemas. Isabel prefería pensar en el futuro que en el pasado, pero en ocasiones, mientras escuchaba el rumor de las olas del Mediterráneo, volvía atrás la mirada, que iba a posarse en dos figuras que todavía, pese a la creciente distancia, ocupaban un lugar destacado y que eran fácilmente reconocibles como lord Warburton y Caspar Goodwood. Resulta extraño ver con qué celeridad aquellos personajes tan llenos de fuerza se habían visto relegados a un segundo plano en la vida de nuestra joven dama. Era parte integral de su naturaleza perder la fe en la realidad de las cosas ausentes; en caso necesario, podía hacer un esfuerzo y recobrar esa fe, pero incluso cuando la realidad había sido placentera, el esfuerzo resultaba con frecuencia doloroso. Lo pasado tenía propensión a parecer muerto, y su recreación, a mostrar la luz violácea del día del juicio final. Además, la joven no acostumbraba a dar por sentado que los demás la tuviesen en mente, no era lo suficientemente fatua para creer que la huella que dejaba era indeleble. Podría sentirse herida al descubrir que la habían olvidado, pero, de entre todas las libertades, la que para ella resultaba más dulce era la libertad de olvidar. No había quemado su último cartucho, sentimentalmente hablando, ni con Caspar Goodwood ni con lord Warburton; sin embargo, no podía evitar pensar que ambos estaban considerablemente en deuda con ella. Como es natural, no se había olvidado de que iba a volver a tener noticias de Caspar Goodwood en un futuro, pero todavía faltaba un año y medio para ello, y en ese tiempo podían ocurrir muchas cosas. Ni se le había pasado por la imaginación que su pretendiente estadounidense pudiese encontrar otra joven más fácil de cortejar, puesto que, si bien era cierto que muchas otras jóvenes demostrarían serlo, no creía ni por un instante que a él le resultase atrayente dicha ventaja. Sin embargo, sus reflexiones le decían queella misma podría llegar a experimentar la humillación de cambiar de idea, que podría

realmente llegar a agotar todo aquello que no representaba Caspar (por mucho que en apariencia fuese inagotable), y encontrar solaz precisamente en aquellos elementos de la personalidad del joven que ahora le parecían impedimentos para respirar con libertad. Cabía la posibilidad de que algún día esos mismos impedimentos revelasen una bendición oculta, un puerto tranquilo de aguas claras, rodeado de un firme rompeolas de granito. Pero ese día llegaría cuando tuviese que llegar, y ella no iba a esperar hasta entonces de brazos cruzados. La idea de que lord Warburton continuase venerando su imagen le parecía que rebasaba los límites de lo que una noble humildad y un orgullo clarividente podrían desear. Era tanto el empeño y tanta la decisión que había puesto en borrar todo recuerdo de lo ocurrido entre ambos que lo justo sería que él, por su parte, hiciese un esfuerzo similar. Y, aunque pudiese parecerlo, esta no era una mera teoría teñida de sarcasmo. Isabel creía sinceramente que su señoría podría, como suele decirse, superar el desengaño. Se había sentido muy afectado, de eso estaba convencida, y todavía era capaz de obtener placer en esa convicción; pero era absurda la idea de que un hombre tan inteligente, y que había recibido un trato tan honorable, quisiera mantener abierta una cicatriz que no guardaba proporción con la herida sufrida. Además, se decía Isabel, a los ingleses lo que les gustaba era vivir tranquilos, y, a largo plazo, lord Warburton no iba a tener mucha tranquilidad si se dedicaba a pensar con nostalgia en una joven estadounidense independiente, que no había sido otra cosa que una amistad pasajera. E Isabel se hacía la ilusión de que, si el día menos pensado le llegaba la noticia de que lord Warburton se había casado con una joven de su país que había hecho más para merecerlo, la recibiría sin sentir la más mínima punzada ni siquiera de sorpresa. Sería la prueba de que la consideraba una mujer firme en sus convicciones, que era como quería que él la viera. Solo con eso, su orgullo se daba por satisfecho.

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Unos seis meses después de la muerte del señor Touchett, un día a principios de mayo, un pequeño grupo que un pintor habría podido describir como una armoniosa composición se encontraba reunido en una de las innumerables estancias de una antigua villa que coronaba una colina recubierta de olivos más allá de la Puerta Romana de Florencia. La villa era una estructura larga, de apariencia un tanto anodina, con uno de esos tejados rematados por anchos aleros que tanto gustan en la Toscana y que vistos desde la distancia, en lo alto de las colinas que rodean Florencia, forman armoniosos rectángulos junto a los oscuros cipreses, enhiestos y bien perfilados, que normalmente se alzan en grupos de tres o cuatro en las proximidades. La fachada de la casa se alzaba tras una pequeña piazza vacía, cubierta de hierba y de aspecto rural, que cubría parte de la cima de la colina; en ella se abrían unas cuantas ventanas irregularmente distribuidas, en cuya base había bancos de piedra de la misma longitud, en los que podían acomodarse una o dos personas con ese aire de subestimada valía con que en Italia, por alguna razón desconocida, se inviste indulgentemente a aquellos que asumen una actitud confiada y totalmente pasiva; no obstante, a aquella fachada sólida, antigua y ajada por el tiempo pero aun así imponente, mostraba un carácter poco abierto a la comunicación. Era la máscara, no el rostro de la casa. Tenía párpados pesados, pero no ojos. La casa, en realidad, miraba hacia el lado contrario, daba por la parte de atrás a unos espléndidos espacios abiertos, envueltos en las tonalidades de la luz vespertina. Por ese lado, la villa dominaba la ladera de la colina y el extenso valle del Arno, con los colores del paisaje italiano difuminados por la calima. Contaba con un estrecho jardín, a manera de terraza, formado principalmente por una maraña de rosales silvestres y más bancos de piedra antiguos, cubiertos de musgo y calentados por el sol. El murete de la terraza tenía la altura justa para asomarse por él, y allá abajo el terreno se iba desdibujando hasta perderse en una nebulosa de olivares y viñedos. Sin embargo, no es el exterior del edificio lo que ahora nos interesa, pues en aquella esplendorosa mañana de primavera los ocupantes del mismo tenían buenas razones para preferir la umbría del otro lado de sus muros. Vistas desde la piazza, las ventanas de la planta baja de nobles proporciones ofrecían una gran prestancia arquitectónica, pero daba la impresión de que su función no fuese tanto la de facilitar la comunicación con el exterior como la de impedir que fuese el mundo el que se asomase a su interior. Estaban protegidas por enormes rejas y situadas a tal altura que la curiosidad, incluso poniéndose de puntillas, se esfumaba antes de alcanzarlas. En una estancia iluminada por una hilera de tres de estas celosas aberturas, en uno de los muchos apartamentos en los que la villa estaba dividida y que ocupaban principalmente extranjeros de diversa procedencia que llevaban largo tiempo en Florencia, se hallaba sentado un caballero en compañía de una niña y de dos religiosas. Dicha estancia, sin embargo, resultaba menos sombría de lo que nuestra descripción podría haber hecho suponer, pues contaba con una amplia puerta de gran altura, que ahora estaba abierta al enmarañado jardín de atrás. Además, las altas celosías de hierro dejaban pasar en ocasiones luz más que suficiente del sol italiano. Se trataba, asimismo, de una estancia cómoda y realmente lujosa, que delataba una decoración estudiada al detalle y un refinamiento sin tapujos, y que albergaba toda una variedad de esos cortinajes de damasco y tapices desvaídos, de esos arcones y vitrinas de madera de roble tallada y bruñida por el tiempo, de esas muestras de arte pictórico de figuras angulosas con marcos igualmente primitivos y ostentosos, de esas reliquias de cobre y cerámica medievales de perverso aspecto, de los que Italia ha sido durante tanto tiempo, y continúa siendo, proveedora inagotable. Dichos objetos convivían en armonía con algunas piezas de mobiliario moderno, de un diseño concebido en gran medida para el acomodo de una generación ociosa, como revelaban las mullidas butacas de asientos hondos y el gran espacio ocupado por un escritorio, cuya ingeniosa perfección llevaba el inconfundible sello de Londres y del siglo XIX. Había toda una profusión de libros, revistas y periódicos, además de algunos cuadros de pequeño tamaño, extraños y muy elaborados, pintados casi todos a acuarela. Una de dichas obras aparecía sobre un caballete ante el que se había situado, en el momento en que empezamos a fijarnos en ella, la niña que antes he mencionado. Contemplaba el cuadro en silencio.

El silencio, el silencio absoluto, no había descendido sobre sus acompañantes, pero la conversación entre ellos parecía de una continuidad forzada. Las dos religiosas no se habían arrellanado en sus respectivos asientos, su actitud mostraba completa reserva y en sus rostros se veía un velo de prudencia. Eran dos mujeres corpulentas, poco

agraciadas y de facciones dulces, con un aire de modestia práctica que se veía realzada por la impersonal tiesura de los hábitos de lino y sarga que las envolvían como si estuviesen claveteados a un marco. Una de ellas, mujer ya de cierta edad, con gafas, de tez fresca y mejillas redondas, tenía un aire más despierto que su compañera, y parecía además ser la responsable de aquella visita, que aparentemente guardaba relación con la niña. Esta última no se había despojado del sombrero, un adorno de extremada sencillez y que no desentonaba con su sencillo vestido de muselina, demasiado corto para su edad, aunque seguramente ya le habían bajado el dobladillo. El caballero, que se suponía que debería estar atendiendo a las dos monjas, era tal vez consciente de las dificultades que entrañaba su cometido, ya que, en cierta manera, resulta igual de arduo conversar con los muy humildes que con los muy poderosos. Al mismo tiempo, se le veía muy interesado en el silencioso objeto bajo tutela de las monjas, y mientras esta estaba de espaldas a él, su mirada grave se posaba en la figura pequeña y delgada de la niña. Era un hombre de unos cuarenta años, de frente alta y cabeza bien proporcionada, cubierta por un cabello, todavía espeso, aunque prematuramente encanecido, que llevaba muy corto. Tenía un rostro fino y largo, de facciones bien modeladas y expresión serena, cuyo único defecto era una tendencia a resultar un tanto demasiado anguloso, efecto al que contribuía en no poca medida la forma de la barba. La barba en cuestión, recortada al estilo de los retratos del siglo XVI y rematada por un bigote rubio cuyas guías se curvaban hacia arriba a la manera romántica, confería a su dueño un aire extranjero e indicaba que se trataba de un caballero que prestaba atención al estilo. Sin embargo, sus ojos alerta y curiosos, de mirada a la vez vaga y penetrante, inteligente y dura, que delataban a una persona observadora a la par que soñadora, os habrían convencido de que cuidaba el estilo siempre dentro de unos límites bien establecidos, y de que siempre que lo buscaba, lo encontraba. Habría resultado tarea casi imposible determinar el clima y el país de su procedencia, ya que carecía de esos rasgos superficiales que normalmente convierten la respuesta a dicha cuestión en algo fácil e insípido. Si era inglesa la sangre que corría por sus venas, estaría probablemente mezclada con gotas de francesa o italiana; pero en la fina moneda de oro que era aquel hombre no se advertía ni el sello ni el emblema con los que normalmente se acuñan las destinadas a la circulación general; él era esa moneda elegante y compleja que se forja para una ocasión especial. Su figura era liviana, delgada y de apariencia un tanto lánguida, y daba la impresión de no ser ni alto ni bajo. Vestía como visten los hombres a los que solo les preocupa que no haya nada de vulgar en su atuendo.

—Dime, cariño, ¿qué te parece? —le preguntó a la niña.

Utilizaba la lengua italiana, y la utilizaba con soltura, pero no habría convencido a nadie de que fuese italiano.

La niña inclinó la cabeza a uno y otro lado, examinando el cuadro con atención.

—Es muy bonito, papá. ¿Lo has pintado tú?

—Claro que lo he pintado yo. ¿No te parece que soy inteligente?

—Sí, papá, muy inteligente. Yo también he aprendido a pintar cuadros.

Y tras esas palabras se dio la vuelta y mostró un bonito rostro de facciones pequeñas en el que se dibujaba permanentemente una sonrisa llena de dulzura.

—Tendrías que haberme traído una muestra de tus habilidades.

—He traído un montón. Están en mi baúl.

—Dibuja con mucho… con mucho esmero —comentó la mayor de las dos monjas, que habló en francés.

—Me alegra oírlo. ¿Es usted quien la ha instruido?

—Por suerte, no —dijo la buena hermana, ruborizándose un poco—. *Ce n'est pas ma partie*. Yo no enseño nada, eso lo dejo para los que son más sabios que yo. Tenemos un profesor de dibujo excelente, el señor… el señor… ¿cómo se llama? —preguntó a su compañera.

La otra monja clavó la mirada en la alfombra.

—Tiene un nombre alemán —dijo en italiano, como si hubiese necesidad de traducirlo.

—Sí —prosiguió su compañera—, es alemán y lleva muchos años con nosotras.

La niña, que no estaba atendiendo a la conversación, se había alejado en dirección a la puerta abierta de la enorme estancia y estaba junto a ella, contemplando el jardín.

—Y usted, hermana, es francesa —dijo el caballero.

—Sí, señor —respondió con dulzura la visitante—. Y me dirijo a las discípulas en mi propia lengua. No conozco otra. Pero tenemos hermanas de otros países: inglesas, alemanas, irlandesas. Todas ellas utilizan la lengua propia.

El caballero le dirigió una sonrisa.

—¿Ha estado mi hija al cuidado de una de esas damas irlandesas? —Y al ver que sus acompañantes, pese a no

entenderlo, sospechaban que se trataba de una broma, añadió al instante—: Son ustedes muy completas.

—Sí, claro que somos completas. Tenemos de todo, y todo de lo mejorcito.

—Tenemos gimnasia —se aventuró a decir la hermana italiana—. Pero no de la peligrosa.

—Eso espero. ¿Es esa su especialidad?

La pregunta provocó la ingenua hilaridad de aquel par de damas; cuando se apagaron las risas, el anfitrión, contemplando a su hija, comentó que había crecido.

—Sí, pero creo que ya ha terminado de hacerlo. No será muy alta —dijo la hermana francesa.

—Pues yo no lo lamento. Prefiero que las mujeres y los libros sean muy buenos y no demasiado largos. Pero no veo ninguna razón —dijo el caballero— para que mi hija sea baja.

La monja se encogió levemente de hombros, como queriendo decir que tales cosas no estaban al alcance de nuestra comprensión.

—Goza de excelente salud, y eso es lo principal.

—Sí, se la ve sana. —Y el padre de la niña la observó un momento—. ¿Qué ves en el jardín? —le preguntó en francés.

—Veo muchas flores —respondió con vocecita dulce y un acento tan bueno como el de él.

—Sí, pero no hay muchas buenas. Sin embargo, aunque no lo sean, ve a coger unas cuantas para *ces dames.*

La niña se volvió hacia él con una sonrisa todavía más encantadora.

—¿De verdad que puedo?

—Te lo estoy pidiendo —respondió el padre.

La niña miró hacia la hermana de mayor edad.

—¿De verdad que puedo, *ma mère*?

—Obedece a monsieur tu padre, hija mía —dijo la hermana, ruborizándose de nuevo.

La niña, satisfecha con aquella autorización, cruzó el umbral y desapareció de la vista de inmediato.

—Veo que no las consienten —comentó su padre alegremente.

—Tienen que pedir permiso para todo. Ese es nuestro sistema. El permiso se les concede sin dificultad, pero tienen que solicitarlo.

—No discuto su sistema, no dudo de que sea excelente. Les envié a mi hija para ver qué podían hacer de ella. Tenía fe en ustedes.

—Hay que tener fe —apostilló la monja con mansedumbre, mirando a través de los anteojos.

—¿Y se ha visto mi fe recompensada? ¿Qué han hecho ustedes de ella?

La hermana bajó un momento la mirada.

—Una buena cristiana, monsieur.

Su anfitrión bajó asimismo la mirada, pero es probable que el gesto estuviese motivado por razones muy distintas en cada caso.

—Sí, ¿y aparte de eso?

Observó a la dama del convento, pensando probablemente que le iba a responder que con ser buena cristiana bastaba, pero pese a toda su sencillez, la religiosa no era tan simple.

—Una joven dama encantadora, una auténtica mujercita, una hija que no le dará más que satisfacciones.

—Sí, a mí me parece muy *gentille* —dijo el padre—. Y es muy bonita.

—Es perfecta. No tiene defectos.

—De pequeña no tenía ninguno, y me alegra que no haya adquirido ninguno con ustedes.

—La queremos demasiado —dijo la hermana de las gafas con dignidad—. Y en cuanto a defectos, ¿cómo podría adquirir con nosotras los que no tenemos? *Le cuvent n'est pas comme le monde, monsieur*. Se podría decir que es hija nuestra, pues ha estado con nosotras desde muy pequeña.

—De todas las que nos dejarán este año, es a ella a la que más vamos a echar de menos —murmuró la más joven con deferencia.

—Ay, sí, vamos a hablar de ella durante mucho tiempo —dijo la otra—. Se la pondremos de ejemplo a las nuevas.

Y tras decir esas palabras, la buena hermana pareció percatarse de que tenía los cristales empañados; su compañera, tras rebuscar un momento en el bolsillo, sacó por fin un pañuelo de un tejido duradero.

—No es seguro que vayan a perderla, todavía no hemos acordado nada —respondió con prontitud su anfitrión, y no lo hizo para anticiparse a sus lágrimas, sino con el tono del que dice lo que a él le resulta más grato.

—Nos alegraría mucho que eso fuese cierto. Quince años son muy pocos para dejarnos.

—¡Ay! —exclamó el caballero con más vivacidad de la que hasta el momento había mostrado—. No soy yo el que quiere llevársela. ¡Ojala se la pudiesen quedar ustedes para siempre!

—Ah, monsieur —dijo la monja de mayor edad, sonriendo al tiempo que se ponía en pie—. Pese a lo buena que es, está hecha para el mundo. *Le monde y gagnera*.

—Si a toda la gente buena se la tuviese encerrada en conventos, ¿qué sería del mundo? —preguntó con dulzura su acompañante, quien se puso asimismo en pie.

Aquella era una pregunta de mayor alcance de lo que la buena mujer parecía sospechar, por lo que la dama de los anteojos, adoptando un tono conciliador, dijo con naturalidad:

—Por fortuna, hay personas buenas en todas partes.

—Si se van, aquí habrá dos menos —comentó galante su anfitrión.

Ante aquella extravagante salida, sus sencillas visitantes no tuvieron respuesta, se limitaron a cruzar entre ellas una mirada de desaprobación llena de decoro, pero su confusión desapareció con rapidez ante la llegada de la niña con dos grandes ramos de rosas, blancas en un caso y rojas en el otro.

—La dejo que escoja usted primero, *mamman* Catherine —dijo la chiquilla—. Solo varía el color, *mamman* Justine; hay el mismo número de rosas en uno que en otro.

Las dos hermanas se miraron sonrientes, dudando.

—¿Cuál quiere usted?

—No, tiene que ser usted la que escoja.

—Entonces el rojo, muchas gracias —dijo la madre Catherine, que era la que llevaba gafas—. Yo también estoy muy roja. Nos servirán de consuelo en el trayecto de vuelta a Roma.

—Ay, no durarán tanto —exclamó la niña—. ¡Ojalá pudiese darles algo que lo hiciese!

—Nos has dado un buen recuerdo tuyo, hija mía. ¡Eso sí que va a durar!

—Ojalá pudiesen las monjas lucir cosas bonitas. Les daría mi collar de cuentas azules —prosiguió la niña.

—¿Regresan a Roma esta noche? —preguntó el padre.

—Sí, tomamos el tren de nuevo. Tenemos tanto que hacer *là-bas*.

—¿No están cansadas?

—Nosotras nunca nos cansamos.

—Bueno, hermana, alguna vez sí —murmuró la más joven de las religiosas.

—En todo caso, hoy no. Hemos descansado muy bien aquí. *Que Dieu vous garde, ma fille*.

Su anfitrión, mientras las hermanas intercambiaban besos con su hija, se acercó a abrir la puerta por la que debían salir, pero al hacerlo, soltó una breve exclamación y se quedó mirando al otro lado. La puerta daba a una antecámara de techo abovedado, alta como una capilla y con suelo de losas rojas, en la que acababa de entrar una dama, que había sido recibida por un criado de librea raída que ahora la acompañaba al apartamento en el que se encontraban reunidos nuestros amigos. El caballero de la puerta, tras soltar la exclamación, guardó silencio; la dama se acercó también en silencio. Él no le dirigió ningún saludo audible ni le tendió la mano, pero se hizo a un lado para permitirle entrar al salón. Al llegar al umbral, ella titubeó.

—¿Hay alguien dentro? —preguntó.

—Alguien a quien usted puede ver.

La dama entró y se encontró frente a las dos monjas y su pupila, que caminaba entre ambas hacia la puerta, llevándolas agarradas del brazo. Al ver a la recién llegada las tres detuvieron el paso, y la dama, que también se había detenido, se quedó mirándolas. La niña lanzó un grito ahogado:

—¡Ah, madame Merle!

La visitante había sufrido un leve sobresalto, pero al instante, sin perder en ningún momento las formas, dijo:

—Sí, es madame que viene a darte la bienvenida a casa.

Y tras esas palabras, tendió ambas manos a la jovencita, quien de inmediato se acercó y le dio a besar la frente. Madame Merle depositó su saludo en aquella parte de la encantadora personita y después miró sonriente a las religiosas. Ellas correspondieron a su sonrisa con una decorosa reverencia, pero no se permitieron examinar abiertamente a aquella mujer imponente y de aspecto radiante que parecía traer consigo algo del resplandor del mundo exterior.

—Estas damas han venido a acompañar a mi hija a casa, y ahora vuelven al convento —explicó el caballero.

—Ah, ¿regresan ustedes a Roma? Yo he llegado hace poco de allí y hacía un tiempo maravilloso.

Las buenas hermanas allí de pie, con las manos ocultas en las mangas, recibieron sus palabras sin hacer comentario alguno; y el señor de la casa preguntó a la recién llegada cuánto tiempo había transcurrido desde su partida de Roma.

—Fue a verme al convento —dijo la joven antes de que la dama interpelada tuviese tiempo de responder.

—He ido en más de una ocasión, Pansy —declaró madame Merle—. ¿No soy acaso tu mejor amiga en Roma?

—La que mejor recuerdo es la última visita —dijo Pansy—, porque me dijo que debería dejar el convento y venirme.

—¿Le dijo usted eso? —preguntó el padre de la muchacha.

—Apenas lo recuerdo. Le dije lo que me pareció que le gustaría oír. Llevo una semana en Florencia y esperaba que viniese usted a verme.

—De haber sabido que usted se encontraba en la ciudad, lo habría hecho. Esas cosas no se saben por ciencia infusa, aunque supongo que debería ser así. Tome asiento, por favor.

Aquellos dos parlamentos fueron pronunciados en un tono de voz peculiar… particularmente tranquilo y más bien quedo, no por una necesidad concreta sino por la costumbre. Madame Merle miró a su alrededor para escoger asiento.

—¿Iba a acompañar a estas mujeres a la puerta? No deje que yo interrumpa la ceremonia. —Y dirigiéndose en francés a las monjas, añadió en tono de despedida—: *Je vous salue, mesdames*.

—Esta dama es una gran amiga nuestra. La habrán visto ustedes en el convento —dijo el anfitrión—. Confiamos mucho en su buen juicio y me ayudará a decidir si mi hija debe volver con ustedes al final de las vacaciones.

—Confío en que decida en nuestro favor, madame —se aventuró a decir la hermana de los anteojos.

—Eso es gentileza del señor Osmond, yo no decido nada —dijo madame Merle, que añadió también en tono gentil —: Creo que tienen ustedes un colegio muy bueno, pero los amigos de la señorita Osmond no debemos olvidar que, por naturaleza, ella está destinada a vivir en el mundo.

—Eso mismo le he dicho yo a monsieur —respondió la hermana Catherine—. Que es preciso prepararla para el mundo —murmuró mirando a Pansy, que se encontraba a cierta distancia y examinaba con atención el elegante atuendo de madame Merle.

—¿Has oído eso, Pansy? Estás destinada por naturaleza a vivir en el mundo —dijo su padre.

La niña fijó un instante en él sus ojos puros e inocentes.

—¿Es que no estoy destinada a estar contigo, papá?

Papá soltó una leve carcajada.

—¡Una cosa no quita la otra! Yo formo parte del mundo, Pansy.

—Con su permiso, nos vamos —dijo la hermana Catherine—. En cualquier caso, que seas buena, sensata y feliz, hija mía.

—No duden de que volveré para verlas —respondió Pansy, y reanudó la despedida con unos abrazos que madame Merle enseguida interrumpió.

—Quédate conmigo, cariño —dijo—, mientras tu padre acompaña a estas buenas señoras a la puerta.

Pansy se la quedó mirando, decepcionada, pero no protestó. Era evidente que estaba imbuida de la idea de sumisión debida a todo aquel que emplease un tono de autoridad, y que no era sino una espectadora pasiva en el designio de su futuro.

—¿No puedo acompañar a *mamman* Catherine al carruaje? —preguntó pese a todo con extrema dulzura.

—Me agradaría más que te quedases conmigo —dijo madame Merle mientras el señor Osmond y sus acompañantes, que habían hecho una nueva reverencia ante la dama, pasaban a la antecámara.

—Pues claro que me quedaré —respondió Pansy, quien se aproximó a madame Merle y le tendió la manecita, que la dama tomó. La niña tenía la mirada fija al otro lado de la ventana y los ojos llenos de lágrimas.

—Me alegra que te hayan enseñado a obedecer —dijo madame Merle—. Eso es lo que deben hacer las niñas buenas.

—Oh, sí, soy muy obediente —dijo Pansy con un punto de vehemencia, casi con jactancia, como si hubiese estado hablando de su forma de tocar el piano. Y a continuación exhaló un leve suspiro, apenas audible.

Madame Merle, sin soltarle la mano, la posó sobre su elegante palma y la examinó. Su mirada era crítica, pero no descubrió nada que censurar, puesto que la pequeña mano de la niña era blanca y delicada.

—Espero que se aseguren de que siempre lleves guantes —dijo al cabo de un momento—. A las niñas no les suele

gustar llevarlos.

—Antes no me gustaban, pero ahora sí que me gustan —respondió la chiquilla.

—Muy bien, te voy a regalar una docena.

—Se lo agradezco mucho. ¿De qué color serán? —preguntó Pansy con interés.

Madame Merle meditó un momento antes de responder:

—De colores prácticos.

—Pero ¿muy bonitos?

—¿Te agradan las cosas bonitas?

—Sí, pero tampoco demasiado —dijo Pansy con un atisbo de ascetismo.

—Muy bien, pues entonces no serán demasiados bonitos —replicó madame Merle con una carcajada. Tomó la otra mano de la niña y la acercó a ella. Después, tras contemplarla un momento, añadió—: ¿Vas a echar mucho de menos a la madre Catherine?

—Sí… cuando piense en ella.

—Entonces, trata de no pensar en ella. Quizá algún día —continuó madame Merle— tengas otra madre.

—No creo que eso sea necesario —dijo Pansy, que de nuevo exhaló un suave suspiro conciliador—. En el convento tenía más de treinta.

Los pasos de su padre resonaron una vez más en la antecámara, y madame Merle se puso en pie, al tiempo que soltaba la mano de la niña. El señor Osmond entró y cerró la puerta; después, sin dirigir la mirada a madame Merle, empujó un par de butacas hasta colocarlas en su sitio. Su visitante esperó un momento a que fuese él quien hablase, sin dejar de mirarlo mientras iba de un lado a otro. Por fin, fue ella la que habló:

—Esperaba que fuese usted a Roma. Pensé que quizá quisiese usted ir a buscar a Pansy en persona.

—Una suposición muy natural, pero me temo que no sea la primera vez que actúo de manera contraria a sus cálculos.

—Así es —concedió madame Merle—, es usted muy perverso.

El señor Osmond se ocupó durante unos momentos en distintos menesteres por toda la estancia —había espacio de sobra por el que moverse—, como si estuviese buscando de forma mecánica pretextos para no prestar una atención que podría resultarle embarazosa. Al final, sin embargo, agotados dichos pretextos, no le quedó otro remedio —a no ser que cogiera un libro— que quedarse quieto, con las manos a la espalda, y mirar a Pansy.

—¿Por qué no has venido conmigo a despedir a *mamman* Catherine? —le preguntó de pronto en francés.

Pansy titubeó un instante, al tiempo que dirigía una mirada a madame Merle.

—Yo le pedí que se quedase conmigo —dijo la dama en cuestión, quien de nuevo había tomado asiento en un lugar distinto.

—Ah, eso está mejor —concedió Osmond.

Y tras esas palabras se dejó caer en una butaca y se quedó mirando a madame Merle, ligeramente echado hacia delante, con los codos apoyados en el extremo de los reposabrazos y las manos entrecruzadas.

—Madame Merle va a regalarme unos guantes —dijo Pansy.

—No tienes por qué contarle eso a todo el mundo, cariño —observó madame Merle.

—Es usted muy buena con ella —dijo Osmond—, pero se supone que tiene todo cuanto necesita.

—Creo que de las monjas ya ha obtenido suficiente.

—Si vamos a hablar de ese asunto, es mejor que ella salga de la habitación.

—Deje que se quede —dijo madame Merle—, hablaremos de otras cosas.

—Si tú no quieres, no escucharé —sugirió Pansy con un aire de candor que resultó convincente.

—Puedes escuchar, encanto, porque no vas a entender —respondió su padre.

La niña, en muestra de deferencia, tomó asiento junto a la puerta abierta desde la que se divisaba el jardín, y volvió hacia allí sus ojos inocentes y llenos de añoranza. El señor Osmond se volvió hacia su otra acompañante y, como sin darle importancia, prosiguió:

—Tiene usted un aspecto realmente estupendo.

—Creo que mi aspecto es siempre el mismo —dijo madame Merle.

—Es usted siempre la misma. Nunca cambia. Es una mujer maravillosa.

—Sí, creo que lo soy.

—Sin embargo, a veces sí que cambia de opinión. Cuando regresó de Inglaterra, me dijo que por el momento iba a

quedarse en Roma.

—Me agrada que recuerde tan bien lo que yo digo. Esa era mi intención. Pero he venido a Florencia para reunirme con unas amigas que han llegado hace poco y de cuyos movimientos no estaba muy segura en aquel momento.

—Esa es una razón típica de usted. Siempre está haciendo cosas por sus amigos.

Madame Merle sonrió abiertamente a su anfitrión.

—Es mucho menos típica que su comentario al respecto, que resulta insincero. En cualquier caso, tampoco se lo recrimino —añadió—, porque no cree en lo que dice, tampoco tiene motivos para hacerlo. Yo no me arruino por mis amigos, no merezco ese elogio suyo. Me preocupo principalmente de mí misma.

—Exacto, pero es que en sí misma van incluidos otros muchos… gran parte del mundo y de todo cuanto existe. Jamás he conocido a nadie cuya vida fuese unida a tantas otras.

—¿En qué consiste para usted la vida de uno? —preguntó madame Merle—. ¿En su apariencia, sus movimientos, sus compromisos, su compañía?

—Para mí, su vida consiste en sus ambiciones —dijo Osmond.

Madame Merle dirigió la mirada un instante hacia Pansy.

—Me pregunto si eso lo habrá entendido —dijo entre murmullos.

—¿Ve por qué no puede quedarse con nosotros? —El padre de Pansy esbozó una sonrisa un tanto triste—. Sal al jardín, *mignonne*, y coge unas flores para madame Merle —prosiguió en francés.

—Eso es justamente lo que quería hacer —dijo Pansy, que se levantó con prontitud y salió sin hacer ruido.

Su padre la siguió hasta la puerta abierta, se quedó un momento contemplándola, y después regresó; pero esta vez permaneció de pie, o mejor dicho, se dedicó a deambular de un lado a otro, como si así alimentase una sensación de libertad que con otra disposición no hubiese disfrutado.

—Mis ambiciones tienen que ver principalmente contigo —dijo madame Merle, levantando hacia él la mirada con cierto atrevimiento.

—Eso nos lleva de vuelta a lo que yo decía. Yo soy parte de tu vida… yo y otras mil personas más. Tú no eres egoísta… y no puedo admitirlo. Si tú fueses egoísta, ¿qué sería yo? ¿Qué epíteto me describiría con exactitud?

—Eres indolente. Para mí, ese es tu peor defecto.

—Pues me temo que de hecho sea el menor.

—Te trae todo sin cuidado —dijo madame Merle con seriedad.

—Así es, creo que no hay nada que me importe mucho. ¿Cómo llamarías a ese defecto? En cualquier caso, mi indolencia fue una de las razones por las que no fui a Roma, pero no fue la única.

—No tiene importancia, al menos para mí, el hecho de que no fueses; aunque me hubiese alegrado verte. Ahora me alegra que no estés en Roma, donde es muy probable que siguieras si hubieras ido hace un mes. En este momento hay algo que quiero que hagas aquí en Florencia.

—Te ruego que no olvides mi indolencia —dijo Osmond.

—La tendré presente, pero te pido que te olvides de ella. De esa forma, tendrás tanto la virtud como la recompensa. No te propongo nada arduo, pero es algo que puede resultar de verdad interesante. ¿Desde cuándo no haces nuevas amistades?

—Creo que no he hecho ninguna desde que te conocí a ti.

—Pues ya es hora de que hagas otra. Tengo una amiga que quiero que conozcas.

En su deambular, el señor Osmond se había acercado una vez más a la puerta abierta y contemplaba a su hija, que iba de un lado a otro bajo el sol intenso.

—¿Y qué voy a ganar yo con eso? —preguntó con una especie de jovial brusquedad.

La respuesta de Madame Merle se hizo esperar.

—Te vas a divertir —dijo, y en su respuesta no había la menor brusquedad, ya que la había estado pensando con detenimiento.

—Si tú lo dices, lo creo sin reservas —dijo Osmond acercándose a ella—. Hay ciertas cuestiones en las que mi confianza en ti es absoluta. Estoy plenamente convencido, por ejemplo, de que sabes distinguir a la perfección la buena de la mala sociedad.

—Toda sociedad es mala.

—Perdóname. No se trata de eso… el conocimiento que te atribuyo no es ninguna especie común de sabiduría. Lo has adquirido de la forma debida, por medio de la práctica: te has dedicado a comparar entre sí a un inmenso número

de personas.

—Pues bien, te invito a que saques provecho de mi conocimiento.

—¿Que saque provecho? ¿Estás segura de que voy a conseguirlo?

—Esa es la esperanza que tengo, pero va a depender de ti. ¡Ojalá pudiese animarte a hacer el esfuerzo!

—¡Vaya, ya salió! Ya sabía yo que tenía que ser algo fatigoso. ¿Qué puede haber, qué puede aparecer por aquí, para que el esfuerzo merezca la pena?

Madame Merle se sonrojó como si la hubiese herido.

—No seas necio, Osmond. Nadie mejor que tú sabe lo que de verdad merece un esfuerzo. ¿Es que acaso no te conozco de antiguo?

—Reconozco que hay ciertas cosas. Pero no es probable que ninguna de ellas suceda en esta vida tan mísera.

—El esfuerzo es lo que las hace posibles —dijo madame Merle.

—En eso tienes parte de razón. ¿Quién es, pues, esa amiga de la que hablas?

—La persona que he venido a ver a Florencia. Se trata de la sobrina de la señora Touchett, a quien seguro que no habrás olvidado.

—¿Una sobrina? La palabra denota juventud e ignorancia. Creo que ya sé dónde quieres ir a parar.

—Sí, es joven, tiene veintitrés años. La conocí en Inglaterra hace varios meses y establecimos una estrecha relación. Me gusta inmensamente y, cosa que no me sucede todos los días, la admiro. A ti te va a pasar otro tanto.

—No si puedo evitarlo.

—Justamente. Pero no vas a poder evitarlo.

—¿Es hermosa, lista, rica, espléndida, enormemente inteligente y su virtud no tiene parangón? Porque solo me interesa conocerla si reúne esas condiciones. Si recuerdas, hace algún tiempo te pedí que no me hablaras jamás de una criatura que no encajase con esa descripción. Ya conozco a suficiente gente deprimente, no necesito conocer a nadie más.

—La señorita Archer no tiene nada de deprimente; es radiante como la mañana. Se ajusta a tu descripción y por eso quiero que la conozcas. Cumple con todos tus requisitos.

—Más o menos, claro está.

—No, al pie de la letra. Es preciosa, cultivada, generosa y, para ser estadounidense, de buena familia. Es asimismo muy lista y muy agradable, y cuenta con una considerable fortuna.

El señor Osmond escuchó en silencio aquellas palabras y dio la impresión de estar dándole vueltas al asunto en la cabeza sin apartar la vista de su informadora.

—¿Qué es lo que quieres hacer con ella? —preguntó al fin.

—Lo que te he dicho. Ponerla en tu camino.

—¿Es que no se merece algo mejor que eso?

—Yo no pretendo saber lo que la gente se merece o no —dijo madame Merle—. Lo único que sé es lo que puedo hacer con ellos.

—¡Siento lástima de la señorita Archer! —declaró Osmond.

Madame Merle se puso en pie.

—Si eso significa que sientes un atisbo de interés hacia ella, tomo buena nota.

Estaban los dos frente a frente. Madame Merle se colocó la mantilla y bajó la mirada mientras lo hacía.

—Tienes un aspecto estupendo —repitió Osmond de forma aún más inesperada que antes—. Algo te traes entre manos. Nunca tienes tan buen aspecto como cuando estás maquinando algo, te sienta siempre de maravilla.

En la actitud y el tono que utilizaban estas dos personas cuando se encontraban en cada nueva ocasión, y sobre todo cuando lo hacían en presencia de otros, había algo indirecto y circunspecto, como si se acercaran uno al otro por caminos oblicuos y se comunicaran mediante sobreentendidos. El efecto que parecían producirse mutuamente era el de intensificar de manera apreciable la cautela del otro. Madame Merle, es evidente, solventaba cualquier situación embarazosa mejor que su amigo; pero, en esta ocasión, ni siquiera ella mostraba la actitud que le hubiese gustado, el perfecto autodominio que habría deseado mostrar ante su anfitrión. Lo que es preciso dejar claro, sin embargo, es que, llegados a cierto punto, ese elemento que se interponía entre ellos, fuese de la índole que fuera, se allanaba solo y quedaban uno frente al otro en un cara a cara más íntimo del que jamás habían tenido con nadie. Eso acababa de suceder. Allí estaban los dos, ambos eran conscientes de conocerse bien, y ambos estaban en general dispuestos a aceptar la satisfacción de conocer al otro, a cambio del inconveniente (fuera lo que fuese) de ser conocido.

—No sabes cuánto desearía que no fueses tan insensible —dijo madame Merle en voz baja—. Siempre te ha perjudicado, y también va a perjudicarte en esta ocasión.

—No soy tan insensible como imaginas. De vez en cuando hay algo que me emociona, como por ejemplo que me dijeras hace un momento que tus ambiciones tienen que ver principalmente conmigo. No lo entiendo, no veo cómo ni por qué razón tendría que ser así. Pero, pese a todo, me emociona.

—Y seguramente lo entiendas aún menos a medida que pase el tiempo. Hay cosas que jamás alcanzarás a comprender, pero tampoco hay especial necesidad de que lo hagas.

—Tú, después de todo, eres la más extraordinaria de las mujeres —dijo Osmond—. Hay mucho más en ti que en la inmensa mayoría de la gente. No sé por qué piensas que la sobrina de la señora Touchett me va a importar tanto cuando… cuando… —Se interrumpió un momento.

—¿Cuando yo te he importado tan poco?

—No es eso, por supuesto, lo que quería decir. Cuando he conocido y valorado a una mujer de tu categoría.

—Isabel Archer es mejor que yo —dijo madame Merle.

Su compañero soltó una carcajada.

—¡Qué mala opinión debes de tener de ella para decir algo así!

—¿Es que me crees capaz de sentir celos? Contéstame a eso, por favor.

—¿Por mi causa? No, en general no lo creo.

—Pues entonces, ven a verme dentro de dos días. Me alojo con la señora Touchett, en el palazzo Crescentini, y la joven estará allí.

—¿Por qué no me pediste sencillamente eso desde un principio, sin mencionar a la joven? —preguntó Osmond—. Ella habría estado allí de todos modos.

Madame Merle lo miró como lo haría una mujer a la que ninguna pregunta que él le hiciese podría pillar desprevenida.

—¿Quieres saber por qué? Porque ya le he hablado de ti.

Osmond frunció el ceño y se apartó, dándole la espalda.

—Preferiría no saber eso. ¿Has visto lo que hay aquí… el último que he pintado? —dijo un momento después, señalando el caballete que sostenía la pequeña acuarela.

Madame Merle se aproximó y la estudió.

—¿Son los Alpes vénetos… es uno de los apuntes que tomaste el año pasado?

—Sí… ¡es que lo adivinas todo!

Ella contempló el cuadro un poco más y a continuación se apartó.

—Sabes que tus cuadros no me interesan.

—Lo sé, pero no deja de sorprenderme. Es innegable que son mucho mejores que los de la mayoría de la gente.

—Puede que así sea. Pero al ser lo único que haces… bueno, es bien poco. Me habría encantado que hicieras otras muchas cosas: eso era lo que yo ambicionaba.

—Sí, me lo has dicho muchas veces; cosas que eran imposibles.

—Cosas que eran imposibles —repitió madame Merle, para después añadir en un tono distinto—: Tu cuadrito es en sí muy bueno. —Y paseó la mirada por la estancia, por las vitrinas antiguas, los cuadros, los tapices, las superficies de seda descolorida—. Al menos, tus aposentos son perfectos. Cada vez que vuelvo aquí, me sorprendo de nuevo; no los conozco mejores en ninguna otra parte. Entiendes de este tipo de cosas más que nadie. Tienes un gusto sumamente exquisito.

—Estoy harto de mi gusto exquisito —dijo Gilbert Osmond.

—Aun así, tienes que traer a la señorita Archer a ver esto. Ya le he hablado del lugar.

—No tengo inconveniente en mostrar mis cosas a nadie, siempre que no se trate de idiotas.

—Lo haces de maravilla. Como cicerone de tu museo no tienes parangón.

En respuesta al cumplido, el señor Osmond se limitó a adoptar una actitud de mayor frialdad, pero a la vez más receptiva.

—¿Dices que es rica?

—Tiene setenta mil libras.

—*En écus bien comptés?*

—No cabe duda alguna en lo que respecta a su fortuna. Se podría decir que la he visto con mis propios ojos.

—¡Qué mujer más admirable…!, me refiero a ti. Y si voy a verla, ¿veré también a la madre?

—¿A la madre? No tiene madre, ni tampoco padre.

—A la tía, entonces. ¿Quién dijiste que era…? La señora Touchett.

—No me supondrá ningún problema mantenerla alejada.

—Yo no tengo nada en su contra —reconoció Osmond—; es más, me gusta la señora Touchett. Tiene una personalidad muy marcada, al viejo estilo, de esas que ya no quedan. Pero el memo ese, el zangolotino del hijo, ¿está por aquí?

—Sí, está aquí, pero no te supondrá ningún problema.

—Es que es un auténtico zopenco.

—Creo que estás muy equivocado. Es un hombre muy inteligente. Pero no suele aparecer cuando estoy yo allí, porque no le agrado.

—¿Qué mejor prueba de lo asno que es? ¿Y dices que es atractiva? —prosiguió Osmond.

—Sí, pero no voy a repetirlo, no sea que luego te lleves una decepción. Tú ven y haz que sea el principio, es todo lo que te pido.

—¿El principio de qué?

Madame Merle guardó silencio un instante.

—Está claro que quiero que te cases con ella.

—¿El principio del fin? Bueno, ya veré yo lo que hago. ¿Le has hablado de esto?

—¿Por quién me tomas? Ella no es una burda pieza en el engranaje, ni yo tampoco.

—La verdad es —dijo Osmond tras reflexionar— que no comprendo tus ambiciones.

—Creo que esta la entenderás cuando hayas visto a la señorita Archer. Aplaza el juicio hasta entonces. —Según hablaba, madame Merle se había ido aproximando a la puerta abierta al jardín y se quedó allí un momento, mirando al exterior—. Pansy se ha puesto preciosa —añadió al fin.

—Eso me ha parecido también a mí.

—Pero ya ha tenido suficiente del convento.

—No lo sé —dijo Osmond—. Me gusta lo que han hecho con ella. Es francamente encantadora.

—Eso no es obra del convento. Forma parte de la naturaleza de la niña.

—En mi opinión, es la combinación de ambas cosas. Pansy tiene la pureza de una perla.

—¿Por qué no vuelve entonces con mis flores? —quiso saber madame Merle—. No parece tener prisa.

—Pues vayamos a buscarlas.

—No le gusto —murmuró la visitante, al tiempo que abría el parasol y salían ambos al jardín.

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Madame Merle, llegada a Florencia poco después de la señora Touchett e invitada por esta a disfrutar durante un mes de su hospitalidad en el palazzo Crescentini, aquella juiciosa madame Merle volvió a hablarle de nuevo a Isabel de Gilbert Osmond y a expresar la esperanza de que se conocieran, aunque no lo hizo con la misma insistencia que, como hemos visto, había empleado al recomendar a la joven al señor Osmond. Tal vez la razón de que no lo hiciera fuese que Isabel no opuso resistencia alguna a la propuesta de madame Merle. En Italia, al igual que en Inglaterra, la dama contaba con multitud de amistades, tanto entre los oriundos del país como entre sus heterogéneos visitantes. Le había mencionado a Isabel los nombres de la mayoría de aquellos que a la joven le convendría «conocer» —aunque, claro está, Isabel podía conocer a quien se le antojase, había añadido—, y había colocado al señor Osmond casi al principio de la lista. Se trataba de un viejo amigo suyo; hacía más de diez años que lo conocía; en pocas palabras, era uno de los hombres más inteligentes y agradables que había en Europa. Estaba en general por encima de la media, ya de por sí respetable; no había comparación. No se trataba de un seductor profesional, nada más lejos, y el efecto que causaba dependía en gran medida de su estado de ánimo y de su humor. En sus momentos de decaimiento, podía caer tan bajo como cualquiera, y lo único que lo salvaba en tales situaciones era su aire afligido de príncipe en el exilio. Pero si algo le importaba o despertaba su interés, o si lo consideraba un reto a su medida (y esa medida tenía que ser exacta), entonces era cuando uno comprobaba su inteligencia y distinción. Dichas cualidades no iban en él emparejadas, como sucede con tanta otra gente, de una falta de compromiso o de claridad. Tenía sus excentricidades, como sin duda Isabel descubriría que tienen todos los hombres que merece la pena conocer, que hacían que no resplandeciese con igual intensidad ante todo el mundo. Sin embargo, madame Merle se atrevía a asegurar que se mostraría ante Isabel con toda su brillantez. Se aburría con facilidad, con facilidad excesiva, y la gente anodina siempre lo sacaba de quicio; pero una joven despierta y cultivada como Isabel le proporcionaría el estímulo que tan ausente estaba de su vida. En cualquier caso, era una persona que no podía dejar de conocer. Uno no podía tratar de vivir en Italia sin granjearse la amistad de Gilbert Osmond, que sabía más del país que cualquier otro, con la excepción de dos o tres catedráticos alemanes. Y si bien estos contaban con conocimientos más vastos que él, era Osmond quien tenía una mayor percepción y un gusto más refinado, ya que era un artista de los pies a la cabeza. Isabel recordaba que su amiga le había hablado de él en Gardencourt, cuando la conversación entre ellas había adquirido profundidad, y se preguntó por un momento cuál sería la naturaleza del vínculo que unía a aquellos espíritus superiores. Tenía la impresión de que detrás de aquellos vínculos de madame Merle había siempre alguna historia, y esa impresión no hacía sino avivar el interés que en ella despertaba aquella mujer tan fuera de lo común. En lo referente a su relación con el señor Osmond, sin embargo, madame Merle no dio a entender otra cosa sino que se trataba de una serena y reposada amistad. Isabel le dijo que estaría encantada de conocer a una persona que gozaba hasta tal punto de su confianza desde hacía tantos años.

—Debe conocer usted a muchos hombres —opinó madame Merle—; debe conocer a cuantos le sea posible, para así acostumbrarse a ellos.

—¿Acostumbrarme? —preguntó Isabel con aquella mirada solemne que parecía a veces delatar un deficiente sentido de la comedia—. ¿Cree que les tengo miedo? Estoy acostumbrada a tratar con ellos como la cocinera con el mozo del carnicero.

—Me refiero a que hay que acostumbrarse a ellos para así despreciarlos. Es lo que acaba pasando con la mayoría de ellos. Tendrá que escoger, para relacionarse, a los pocos que no merezcan su desprecio.

Había en aquellas palabras una nota de cinismo que madame Merle no se permitía con frecuencia, pero Isabel no se sintió alarmada, ya que jamás había imaginado que, a medida que uno iba conociendo el mundo, el sentimiento de respeto se convirtiese en la más activa de las emociones. La hermosa ciudad de Florencia, sin embargo, sí que despertaba en ella dicha emoción, y le gustaba tanto como madame Merle había prometido. Y en caso de que su percepción no hubiese alcanzado a valorar por sí sola todos los encantos de la ciudad, contaba con los servicios de inteligentes acompañantes para desentrañar sus misterios. Desde luego no faltaba quien la iluminase en la parte estética, ya que para Ralph suponía un auténtico placer que hizo renacer su antigua pasión de ejercer de cicerone

para aquella joven pariente suya tan llena de entusiasmo. Madame Merle se quedaba en casa; había visto una y otra vez los tesoros de Florencia y encontraba siempre algo mejor que hacer. Pero hablaba de todo haciendo gala de una memoria notablemente vívida: recordaba a la perfección el ángulo derecho del enorme cuadro de Perugino, y la posición de las manos de santa Isabel en el que colgaba junto a él. Tenía sus propias opiniones con respecto al carácter de muchas de las obras de arte famosas, y a menudo disentía de Ralph con gran agudeza y defendía sus interpretaciones con tanto ingenio como buen humor. Isabel escuchaba las discusiones que se producían entre ambos con la sensación de que podía sacar mucho provecho de las mismas y de que estaban entre las ventajas de las que, por ejemplo, no habría podido disfrutar en Albany. En las mañanas luminosas del mes de mayo, antes del almuerzo formal que en casa de la señora Touchett se servía a las doce del mediodía, deambulaba en compañía de su primo por las callejuelas estrechas y umbrías de Florencia, deteniéndose un momento a descansar en la penumbra aún más densa de alguna iglesia histórica o en las estancias abovedadas de algún convento abandonado. Visitaba las galerías y los palacios; contemplaba los cuadros y las estatuas que hasta entonces no habían sido sino grandes nombres para ella, y que sustituía por un conocimiento que en ocasiones constituía una limitación, un presentimiento que normalmente resultaba ser erróneo. Se entregaba a todos esos actos de postración mental a los que, en una primera visita a Italia, arrastran sin remedio la juventud y el entusiasmo; sintió latir el corazón en presencia del genio inmortal y conoció la dulzura de las lágrimas que empañan los ojos y hacen que se difuminen los frescos descoloridos y los mármoles ennegrecidos. Pero el regreso a lo cotidiano era aún más placentero que la partida; el retorno a aquel patio amplio y monumental de la enorme casa en la que, muchos años atrás, la señora Touchett se había instalado, y a las frescas estancias de techos elevados, donde vigas de madera tallada y pomposos frescos del siglo XVI contemplaban con desprecio las vulgares comodidades de la era de la publicidad. La señora Touchett habitaba un edificio histórico en una estrecha callejuela cuyo nombre evocaba refriegas medievales entre facciones, y veía compensada la oscuridad de la fachada por lo módico del alquiler y por el esplendor de un jardín en el que la misma naturaleza parecía tan arcaica como la hosca arquitectura del palacio y que iluminaba y perfumaba las estancias de uso habitual. Vivir en un lugar como aquel, para Isabel, era como tener todo el día pegada al oído una caracola del mar del pasado, cuyo rumor lejano y constante mantenía viva su imaginación.

Gilbert Osmond acudió a visitar a madame Merle, quien se lo presentó a la joven dama en actitud vigilante en el otro extremo de la estancia. En aquella ocasión, Isabel apenas intervino en la conversación y apenas esbozó una sonrisa cuando los otros se volvieron hacia ella con gesto de invitación. Permaneció allí sentada como si estuviese en el teatro y hubiese pagado además una suma considerable por su butaca. La señora Touchett no estaba presente, y aquellos dos tuvieron el camino despejado para exhibirse en toda su brillantez. Hablaron de los florentinos, de los romanos, del mundo cosmopolita, y se los habría podido confundir con actores distinguidos que tomasen parte en una función benéfica. Todo lo decían con la prontitud y la soltura que proporciona el ensayo. Madame Merle se dirigía a ella como si estuviesen en un escenario, pero Isabel podía hacer caso omiso de cualquier pie aprendido sin por ello estropear la escena, aunque de esa forma lo que hacía era dejar en muy mal lugar a aquella amiga que le había dicho al señor Osmond que Isabel era alguien que jamás le fallaba. Pero por una vez no le importaba. Había algo en aquel visitante que la frenaba y la mantenía en vilo, que hacía que fuese más importante formarse una opinión de él que causarle por su parte impresión alguna. Además, no era muy ducha en el arte de causar la impresión que sabía que se esperaba de ella: nada era tan gratificante, en general, que aparecer deslumbrante, pero sentía una aversión casi perversa a deslumbrar por encargo. El señor Osmond, era de justicia reconocerlo, tenía aspecto de persona educada que no espera nada, una tranquilidad natural que lo impregnaba todo, incluso sus primeras muestras de ingenio. Eso resultaba aún más agradable al tener un rostro que denotaba sensibilidad; no era apuesto, pero sí distinguido, tan distinguido como aquellas figuras de la larga galería sobre el puente de los Uffizi. Y hasta su voz resultaba distinguida, cosa más bien extraña, puesto que, pese a su timbre claro, no podría decirse que fuese una voz dulce. Esa había sido la razón por la que Isabel se había abstenido de intervenir en la conversación. La dicción de Osmond era como la vibración del cristal, y si ella hubiese posado el dedo, tal vez habría alterado la tonalidad y estropeado el concierto. Pese a todo, antes de que él se marchase, no iba a tener más remedio que hablar.

—Madame Merle —dijo Osmond— ha aceptado la invitación para venir a mi atalaya un día de la próxima semana a tomar el té en el jardín. Sería un gran placer para mí que usted la acompañase. La gente encuentra muy bonito el sitio… se disfruta de lo que llaman una vista panorámica. Mi hija se alegraría mucho también, aunque, como ella es muy joven para sentir emociones profundas, sería yo el que se alegraría, me alegraría mucho… —Y el señor Osmond se interrumpió con aire un tanto azorado sin terminar la frase—. Me alegraría mucho que conociese usted a mi hija

—concluyó un momento después.

Isabel repuso que estaría encantada de conocer a la señorita Osmond y que si madame Merle le mostraba el camino a la casa de la colina le quedaría muy agradecida. Tras obtener dicha garantía, el visitante se despidió, e Isabel tuvo el convencimiento de que su amiga iba a reprocharle aquel estúpido comportamiento. Pero para su sorpresa la dama, que ciertamente jamás incurría en lo consabido, le dijo momentos después:

—Ha estado usted encantadora, querida; no se habría podido pedir más. Usted nunca decepciona.

Una reprimenda podría haber resultado irritante, aunque es mucho más probable que ella no se lo hubiese tomado a mal. Sin embargo, por extraño que resulte, lo cierto es que las palabras empleadas por madame Merle tuvieron la virtud de provocar en Isabel la primera sensación de desagrado que experimentó hacia aquella aliada suya.

—Eso es más de lo que yo pretendía —respondió con frialdad—. Que yo sepa, no tengo obligación alguna de agradar al señor Osmond.

Madame Merle se sonrojó visiblemente, pero ya sabemos que no tenía por costumbre retractarse.

—Querida niña, no hablaba por él, pobre hombre; hablaba por usted. Como es natural, no es cuestión de que usted le guste a él; ¡importa poco si le gusta o no! Pero me pareció que a usted sí que le gustaba él.

—Así es —dijo Isabel con franqueza—. Pero tampoco veo que eso tenga importancia.

—Para mí tiene importancia todo lo que a usted concierne —dijo madame Merle con su aire de cansada nobleza—, en especial cuando también concierne a otro viejo amigo mío.

Fuesen cuales fuesen las obligaciones de Isabel con respecto al señor Osmond, hay que reconocer que las consideró lo suficientemente importantes para someter a Ralph a todo tipo de preguntas sobre él. En su opinión, los juicios de Ralph estaban distorsionados por sus tribulaciones, pero se congratulaba de haber aprendido ya a sortear dicho inconveniente.

—¿Que si lo conozco? —fue la respuesta de su primo—. Pues claro que lo conozco; no muy bien, pero en general sí lo suficiente. Jamás he cultivado su trato, y por lo que parece, él tampoco ha considerado el mío indispensable para su felicidad. ¿Quién es? ¿A qué se dedica? Es un estadounidense de origen vago, impreciso, que lleva unos treinta años, o tal vez menos, viviendo en Italia. ¿Que por qué digo que es impreciso? Solo para enmascarar mi ignorancia; desconozco sus antecedentes, su familia, su procedencia. Por lo que yo sé podría ser un príncipe de incógnito; y, a propósito, eso es lo que aparenta, un príncipe que hubiese abdicado en un momento de hastío y desde entonces se encontrara a disgusto. Solía vivir en Roma, pero en los últimos años ha fijado aquí su residencia; recuerdo haberle oído decir que Roma se había vuelto vulgar. Y a él le horroriza la vulgaridad. Y que yo sepa, no tiene nada más, eso es lo único destacable en él. Vive de sus rentas, que por lo que sospecho no son vulgarmente cuantiosas, y se define a sí mismo como un caballero pobre pero honrado. Contrajo matrimonio joven y perdió a su esposa, y creo que tiene una hija. También tiene una hermana, casada con uno de esos condes de poca monta que abundan por aquí. Recuerdo haberla conocido hace tiempo. En mi opinión, es más agradable que él, pero un tanto desquiciante. Recuerdo que circulaban algunas historias sobre ella. No te recomiendo que la conozcas. Pero ¿por qué no le preguntas a madame Merle por esa gente? Los conoce a todos mucho mejor que yo.

—Te lo pregunto a ti porque quiero tu opinión, además de la suya.

—¡Valiente cosa mi opinión! Si te enamoras del señor Osmond, ¿qué más te da lo que yo piense?

—Lo más probable es que me diese igual. Pero, entretanto, tiene cierta importancia. Cuanta más información se tenga sobre los peligros que se corren, tanto mejor.

—Yo no estoy de acuerdo en eso… puede que al contrario. Tenemos demasiada información hoy día sobre la gente, oímos demasiadas cosas. Nos llenamos los oídos, las mentes y las bocas de personajes. No hagas caso de lo que nadie te diga de otro. Juzga a cada uno, juzga cada cosa por ti misma.

—Eso es lo que procuro hacer —dijo Isabel—, pero cuando lo haces, la gente te tilda de engreída.

—Pues que te traiga sin cuidado, a eso es precisamente a lo que me refiero: lo que digan de ti debe importarte igual de poco que lo que digan de un amigo o un enemigo tuyo.

Isabel meditó aquellas palabras un instante.

—Creo que estás en lo cierto, pero hay ciertas cosas que no puedo evitar que me importen: por ejemplo, que ataquen a un amigo o que me alaben a mí.

—Por supuesto, siempre tienes la libertad de juzgar al que critica. Sin embargo, como juzgues a la gente en plan crítico —añadió Ralph—, los condenarás a todos.

—Juzgaré al señor Osmond por mí misma —dijo Isabel—. Le he prometido hacerle una visita.

—¿Hacerle una visita?

—Sí, ir a conocer las vistas de su casa, sus cuadros, a su hija… no sé muy bien qué. Va a llevarme madame Merle. Por lo que me dice, van muchas damas a visitar al señor Osmond.

—Ah, si es con madame Merle, puedes ir adonde sea, *de confiance* —dijo Ralph—. Solo conoce a lo mejorcito.

Isabel no dijo nada más del señor Osmond, pero, tras un momento, le comentó a su primo que no le agradaba el tono que empleaba al hablar de madame Merle.

—Tengo la sensación de que estás insinuando cosas de ella. No sé a qué te refieres, pero si tienes motivos para que no te agrade, creo que deberías exponerlos con franqueza o, de lo contrario, no decir nada.

Ralph, sin embargo, reaccionó a la acusación con una seriedad al parecer mayor que de costumbre.

—Yo hablo de madame Merle exactamente de la forma en que le hablo a ella: con un respeto incluso exagerado.

—Exagerado, tú lo has dicho. De eso es de lo que me quejo.

—Si lo hago, es porque los méritos de madame Merle se exageran.

—Dime, ¿quién los exagera? ¿Acaso yo? Porque si es así, le estoy haciendo un flaco favor.

—No, no. Es ella la que los exagera.

—¡Eso sí que no! —exclamó Isabel con vehemencia—. ¡Jamás ha habido mujer con menos pretensiones que…!

—Has puesto el dedo en la llaga —la interrumpió Ralph—. Es de una modestia exagerada. No tiene por qué tener tan pocas pretensiones, está en todo su derecho de tenerlas, y muchas.

—Entonces es que sus méritos son grandes. Te estás contradiciendo.

—Sus méritos son inmensos —dijo Ralph—. Es de todo punto intachable, un auténtico dechado de virtudes, la única mujer que conozco que jamás te da un motivo.

—¿Un motivo para qué?

—Bueno… ¡para llamarla necia! Es la única mujer que conozco que solo tiene ese pequeño defecto.

Isabel se apartó de él con gesto impaciente.

—No te entiendo. Resultas demasiado paradójico para mi humilde inteligencia.

—Pues déjame que te explique. Al decir que exagera, no lo hago en el sentido vulgar de la palabra, o sea, no es que presuma, ni que infle las cosas, ni que dé una imagen demasiado favorable de sí misma. Hablo en sentido literal, lo que digo es que lleva su ansia de perfección demasiado lejos, que sobrepasa sus propios méritos. Es demasiado buena, demasiado amable, demasiado inteligente, demasiado culta, demasiado experimentada, demasiado todo. En pocas palabras, es demasiado completa. Te confieso que a mí me altera los nervios y que lo que siento por ella se parece mucho a lo que aquel ateniense tan profundamente humano sentía por Arístides el Justo.

Isabel miró detenidamente a su primo, pero en esta ocasión no vio en su rostro indicio alguno del espíritu burlón que solía anidar en sus palabras.

—¿Es que te gustaría mandar a madame Merle al destierro?

—En absoluto. Su compañía es demasiado agradable. Yo la encuentro deliciosa.

—¡Qué hombre más odioso! —exclamó Isabel.

Y a continuación le preguntó si sabía de algo que hiciese desmerecer a su brillante amiga.

—Nada de nada. ¿No te das cuenta de que es a eso a lo que me refiero? En el carácter de cualquier otra persona es posible encontrar una pequeña mancha oscura. Si me tomase media hora un día de estos, no me cabe duda de que encontraría alguna en el tuyo. En lo que a mí se refiere, tengo más manchas que un leopardo. Pero es que madame Merle no tiene ninguna… ¡nada!

—Eso es justo lo que yo opino —dijo Isabel con un enfático movimiento de cabeza—. Y por eso me gusta tanto.

—Para ti es una persona imprescindible. Ya que quieres conocer mundo, madame Merle es la mejor guía que podrías encontrar.

—Con eso, imagino que querrás decir que es una mujer de mundo.

—¿De mundo? No —respondió Ralph—. Ella es el gran globo del mundo en persona.

Lo cierto es que asegurar que madame Merle le parecía deliciosa, aunque a Isabel le costase en principio creerlo, no era una refinada muestra de la malicia de su primo. Ralph Touchett obtenía solaz de donde lo hubiera, y no se habría perdonado a sí mismo una indiferencia total hacia los encantos de semejante maestra en las artes sociales. Hay simpatías y antipatías profundamente arraigadas, y, pese a la justicia con que Ralph juzgaba a madame Merle, es muy probable que la ausencia de esta de la casa de su madre no hubiese llegado a convertir su vida en un erial. Pero Ralph Touchett había aprendido a ser un espectador más o menos inescrutable, y era imposible asistir a algo que

mantuviese el interés más vivo que la actuación global de madame Merle. Él la saboreaba a pequeños sorbos, la dejaba actuar, con un sentido de la oportunidad que ni ella misma habría superado. Había momentos en los que casi sentía lástima de ella; y, curiosamente, era entonces cuando menos muestras daba de su generosidad. Estaba convencido de que madame Merle había tenido una ambición sin límites y de que lo que en apariencia había logrado quedaba muy por debajo de su rasero secreto. Se había adiestrado con verdadera dedicación, pero no había obtenido ningún premio. Seguía siendo solo madame Merle, viuda de un *négociant* suizo, con una pequeña renta y un sinfín de amistades, una dama que pasaba mucho tiempo en casas de otros y que era objeto del beneplácito general como un libro recién publicado, ameno e intrascendente. El contraste entre esta realidad y la de cualquiera de la media docena de posiciones que, suponía Ralph, madame Merle había aspirado a alcanzar en distintos momentos, tenía un elemento de tragedia. La señora Touchett creía que su hijo se llevaba a las mil maravillas con aquella invitada tan sociable. En su opinión, dos personas que seguían hasta tal punto unas pautas de conducta tan ingeniosas, es decir, tan suyas, por fuerza debían tener muchas cosas en común. Ralph había calibrado a fondo la intimidad de Isabel con su eminente amiga, y hacía tiempo que había aceptado que no podía guardarse a su prima para él solo sin encontrar resistencia. Y trataba de llevarlo lo mejor posible, al igual que había hecho con cosas peores. Estaba convencido de que aquella situación se resolvería sola, de que no iba a durar para siempre. Ninguna de aquellas dos damas tan superiores conocía a la otra todo lo bien que se imaginaba, y cuando cada una de ellas descubriese uno o dos detalles de importancia se produciría, si no una ruptura, al menos un distanciamiento. Mientras tanto, no tenía reparo en reconocer que la conversación de la dama mayor resultaba de provecho para la más joven, a la que le quedaba mucho por aprender y que, era indudable, aprendería más con madame Merle que con cualquier otro instructor de la juventud. No era probable que Isabel sufriese perjuicio alguno.

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Habría resultado realmente difícil determinar qué perjuicio podría ocasionarle a Isabel la visita que por fin hizo a la casa del señor Osmond en lo alto de la colina. Nada podría haber resultado más encantador en aquella ocasión, en aquella deliciosa tarde con la primavera toscana en pleno apogeo. El coche de las dos amigas franqueó la Puerta Romana, pasando bajo la enorme superestructura lisa que corona el sencillo y elegante arco de dicho portal y que hace que resulte impresionante en su desnudez, y después serpenteó por callejuelas flanqueadas de altas tapias por las que se desparramaba la exuberancia y la fragancia de los huertos en flor, hasta alcanzar aquella piazza de trazado irregular que dominaba la ciudad, en la que la larga muralla de color marrón de la villa que ocupaba en parte el señor Osmond era un elemento fundamental o, cuando menos, destacado. Isabel atravesó con su amiga un patio amplio y elevado, en el que el nivel inferior estaba sumido en una leve sombra, mientras que en el superior dos galerías de arcos livianos, la una frente a la otra, concentraban la luz del sol en sus esbeltas columnas y en las plantas que las cubrían. El lugar tenía un aire adusto y recio; daba la impresión de que, una vez en su interior, fuera necesario hacer acopio de energía para salir de él. Por la mente de Isabel, sin embargo, no cruzaba todavía pensamiento alguno de salir de allí, sino únicamente de adentrarse en el lugar. El señor Osmond salió a recibirlas a la fría antecámara, fría incluso en el mes de mayo, y las condujo, a ella y a la dama que era su guía, a los aposentos antes descritos. Madame Merle iba delante, y mientras Isabel se entretenía un instante hablando con su anfitrión, la dama dio muestras de su familiaridad con el lugar al entrar en la sala y saludar a las dos personas allí sentadas. Una de ellas era la pequeña Pansy, en cuya mejilla depositó un beso; la otra era una dama que el señor Osmond presentó a Isabel como su hermana, la condesa Gemini.

—Y esta es mi hijita —dijo—, que acaba de salir del convento.

Pansy llevaba un ligero vestido blanco, y el rubio cabello primorosamente recogido en una redecilla; lucía unos pequeños zapatos anudados a los tobillos, a modo de sandalias. Obsequió a Isabel con una leve reverencia conventual, y a continuación se aproximó para que la besase. La condesa Gemini se limitó a inclinar la cabeza sin abandonar su asiento. Isabel advirtió que se trataba de una mujer de mucho postín. Era morena, delgada y nada bella, pues sus facciones recordaban a un pájaro tropical: nariz larga y curvada como un pico, ojos pequeños e inquietos y boca y barbilla hundidas en exceso. El rostro, sin embargo, merced a sus variadas expresiones de asombro y énfasis, de alegría y horror, no carecía de humanidad y, en lo que concernía a su apariencia, era evidente que se conocía bien y sabía cómo resaltar sus puntos fuertes. Su atuendo, delicado y voluminoso, rebosante de elegancia, semejaba un refulgente plumaje, y sus ademanes eran tan súbitos y leves como los del ave que se posa en una rama. Tenía mucho estilo; e Isabel, que jamás había conocido a nadie con tanta clase, la clasificó de inmediato como la más afectada de las mujeres. Recordó que Ralph le había recomendado no cultivar su amistad, pero estaba dispuesta a reconocer que, a primera vista, la condesa Gemini no parecía tener mucho fondo. Sus gestos traían a la mente el ondear violento de una bandera de armisticio general, entre revuelos de seda blanca y gallardetes.

—Se convencerá de cuánto me alegra conocerla si le digo que he venido únicamente porque sabía que iba a estar usted aquí. Yo no vengo a visitar a mi hermano, hago que sea él quien venga a verme a mí. Esta colina suya es terrible, no sé qué le encuentra. De verdad, Osmond, un día de estos vas a acabar con mis caballos, y, como les pase algo malo, tendrás que comprarme un nuevo par. Hoy los he oído jadear, te lo juro. Y es francamente desagradable oír cómo resuellan los caballos cuando una va sentada en el carruaje; da la impresión de que no fuesen lo que deberían ser. Pero yo siempre he tenido buenos caballos; puede que haya carecido de otras cosas, pero siempre me las he arreglado para tenerlos. Mi esposo no es que sepa mucho, pero creo que de caballos sí que entiende. Los italianos por lo general no lo hacen, pero mi esposo, con sus escasas luces, está a favor de todo lo que sea inglés. Y mis caballos son ingleses, así que sería una verdadera lástima que se echaran a perder. Debo decirle —continuó, dirigiéndose a Isabel— que Osmond no me invita a menudo, que no creo que le agrade tenerme aquí. Lo de venir hoy ha sido solo idea mía. Me gusta conocer gente nueva, y estoy segura de que usted lo es, y mucho. Pero no se siente ahí, esa butaca no es lo que parece. Aquí hay algunos sillones muy cómodos, pero también otros que son un horror.

Formuló tales observaciones con toda suerte de sacudidas y picotazos, entre gorjeos agudos, y con un acento que

tenía cierto regusto a buena pronunciación inglesa, o más bien americana, en apuros.

—¿Que no me gusta tenerte aquí, querida? —dijo su hermano—. Me consta que no tienes precio.

—Yo no veo tales horrores por ningún lado —replicó Isabel, mirando a su alrededor—. Encuentro todo precioso y de mucho valor.

—Tengo unas cuantas cosas buenas —concedió el señor Osmond—; de hecho, no tengo nada que sea muy malo. Pero no tengo lo que me habría gustado tener.

El caballero continuaba en pie, un tanto incómodo, sonriendo y mirando a su alrededor; su actitud era una extraña mezcla de desapego e interés. Parecía dar a entender que todo lo que no tuviese suficiente valor carecía de importancia. Isabel llegó con rapidez a la conclusión de que la sencillez no era precisamente la divisa de aquella familia. Hasta aquella jovencita del convento, que, con su vestido blanco tan formal, con aquella expresión sumisa en el pequeño rostro y las manos entrelazadas ante ella, estaba allí de pie como si fuese a tomar su primera comunión, hasta aquella diminuta hija del señor Osmond tenía una especie de barniz no exento por completo de artificio.

—A usted le habría gustado tener algunas cosas de los Uffizi y del palacio Pitti, eso es lo que le habría gustado —dijo madame Merle.

—¡Pobre Osmond, con sus cortinajes y sus crucifijos viejos! —exclamó la condesa Gemini, quien al parecer se dirigía a su hermano exclusivamente por el apellido.

La observación no iba dirigida a nadie en particular, aunque al pronunciarla sonrió a Isabel y la miró de arriba abajo.

Su hermano no la había oído; parecía estar pensando qué decirle a Isabel. Por fin, se decidió a preguntarle:

—¿Le apetece tomar una taza de té? Debe de estar muy cansada.

—No, de veras, no estoy cansada, ¿qué he hecho para cansarme?

Isabel sentía la necesidad de mostrarse muy directa, de no utilizar ningún subterfugio; había algo en el ambiente, en su impresión general de las cosas —aunque no habría podido precisar qué era exactamente—, que le quitaba las ganas de hacerse notar. Aquel lugar, la ocasión, la mezcla de personas, todo tenía un significado más profundo de lo que a primera vista parecía y ella iba a intentar descifrarlo y no a limitarse a decir frases educadas e insustanciales. La pobre Isabel, sin duda, no era consciente de que muchas mujeres habrían hecho precisamente eso: encubrir una atenta observación con comentarios superficiales. Es preciso confesar que su orgullo se sentía un tanto alarmado: un hombre del que había oído hablar en términos que suscitaban interés y que evidentemente era capaz de distinguirse la había invitado a ella, una dama joven que no prodigaba sus favores, a ir a su casa. Ahora que estaba allí, lo natural era que fuese obligación del caballero echar mano del ingenio y amenizar la visita. Isabel, por el momento, no se sentía menos observadora ni, a nuestro juicio, más indulgente, al comprobar que el señor Osmond no cumplía con dicha obligación con todo el entusiasmo que habría sido de esperar. Imaginó que estaría diciéndose a sí mismo: «¡Qué necio he sido al permitir que me metieran en esto sin ninguna necesidad!».

—Si le muestra todos sus *bibelots* y le da una conferencia sobre cada uno de ellos, entonces sí que se encontrará cansada cuando vuelva a casa —dijo la condesa Gemini.

—Eso no me da miedo; por mucho cansancio que sienta, al menos habré aprendido algo.

—Muy poco, imagino. Es que a mi hermana le espanta aprender cualquier cosa —dijo el señor Osmond.

—Ah, confieso que así es. No deseo aprender nada más, ya sé demasiado. Cuanto más se sabe, más infeliz se es.

—No debería usted subestimar el conocimiento delante de Pansy, que todavía no ha terminado su educación —interpuso madame Merle con una sonrisa.

—A Pansy nunca le harán daño —dijo el padre de la jovencita—. Pansy es una florecilla de convento.

—¡Ah, los conventos, dichosos conventos! —exclamó la condesa entre un revoloteo de volantes—. ¡A mí no me hables de conventos! Allí se aprende de todo, yo también soy flor de convento. Yo no tengo pretensiones de ser buena, pero las monjas sí. ¿Comprende usted lo que quiero decir? —continuó dirigiéndose a Isabel.

Isabel no estaba muy segura de entenderla, y respondió que no se le daba bien seguir las discusiones. La condesa declaró entonces que ella las detestaba, pero que en cambio a su hermano le encantaban, que siempre discutía.

—En mi opinión —dijo—, o te gusta algo o no te gusta. Y está claro que no todo puede gustarte. Pero no se debería tratar de razonarlo, pues nunca se sabe adónde se puede ir a parar. Hay algunos sentimientos muy buenos que pueden deberse a razones muy malas, ¿no le parece? Y también hay sentimientos muy malos que, a veces, pueden deberse a razones muy buenas. ¿Entiende usted lo que quiero decir? A mí las razones me traen sin cuidado, pero sé lo que me gusta.

—Pues eso es lo importante —dijo Isabel sonriendo, y con la sospecha de que su relación con aquel personaje tan superficial no iba a proporcionarle ningún solaz intelectual.

Si a la condesa le molestaba discutir, a Isabel en aquel momento tampoco le apetecía hacerlo, de modo que tendió la mano a Pansy con la agradable sensación de que dicho gesto no la comprometía a nada que pudiera originar una divergencia de opiniones. Al parecer, Gilbert Osmond aceptaba como algo irremediable el tono de su hermana, y desvió la conversación hacia otro asunto. Fue a sentarse al otro lado de su hija, que había rozado con timidez los dedos de Isabel con los suyos, pero hizo que la niña abandonara su asiento para que se pusiera de pie entre sus rodillas, recostada contra él, mientras le rodeaba la cintura con los brazos. Pansy clavó los ojos en Isabel, con una mirada fija y carente de interés que aparentemente no reflejaba ninguna intención, aunque sí la conciencia de una atracción. El señor Osmond habló de muchas cosas; madame Merle había dicho que cuando se lo proponía podía resultar agradable y hoy, transcurrido un tiempo, dio la impresión no solo de proponérselo sino de empeñarse en serlo. Madame Merle y la condesa Gemini estaban sentadas algo apartadas, y conversaban con la tranquilidad de quienes se conocen lo suficiente para no tener que esforzarse; aunque, de vez en cuando, Isabel oía cómo la condesa, en respuesta a algo que su interlocutora había dicho, se lanzaba en pos de sus lúcidos comentarios como un caniche se lanza al agua entre salpicaduras en pos del palo que se le ha arrojado. Era como si madame Merle quisiese comprobar hasta dónde estaba dispuesta a adentrarse. El señor Osmond habló de Florencia, de Italia, del placer que suponía vivir en aquel país y de las cortapisas a dicho placer. Había tanto satisfacciones como inconvenientes, y estos eran muy numerosos, por mucho que los forasteros no viesen más que la parte romántica. Resultaba acogedor para el fracaso humano, para el fracaso social, y con esto se refería a aquellas personas que, como ellas mismas decían, eran incapaces de sacar provecho material de su sensibilidad. Aquí podían conservarla, en su pobreza y sin caer en el ridículo, igual que se conserva un legado o una propiedad incómoda que se ha heredado y que no proporciona beneficio alguno. En ese aspecto, había ventajas en vivir en el país que contenía el súmmum de la belleza. Solo allí se podían percibir ciertas sensaciones. Otras, favorables a la vida, no se obtenían nunca, y algunas de las recibidas eran pésimas. Pero, de vez en cuando, se percibía algo de tanta calidad que compensaba por todo lo demás. Pese a todo, Italia también había echado a perder a mucha gente. Incluso él mismo era a veces lo suficiente fatuo para creer que, de haber pasado menos años de su vida en el país, podría haber sido un hombre mejor. Italia lo volvía a uno perezoso y lo convertía en un diletante, en alguien mediocre. El país no fomentaba el carácter disciplinado, o dicho de otro modo, no empujaba a uno a cultivar el éxito social ni otros aspectos mundanos que florecían en París o en Londres.

—Somos deliciosamente provincianos —afirmó Osmond—, y en mi caso soy perfectamente consciente de que tengo tanta herrumbre como una llave que no encaja en ninguna cerradura. Hablar con usted me devuelve cierto lustre… y no es que me atreva a tener la pretensión de abrir un cerrojo tan intrincado como sospecho es su intelecto. Pero usted se irá de aquí antes de que tenga ocasión de verla en tres ocasiones, y después tal vez no vuelva a verla nunca. Eso es lo que conlleva vivir en un país al que la gente viene de visita. Si los que vienen son desagradables, malo; pero cuando son agradables, es aún peor. En cuanto les has cobrado afecto, se marchan a otro lugar. Me he visto decepcionado en demasiadas ocasiones, así que he dejado de crear vínculos, de permitirme sentir atracciones. ¿Es su intención quedarse… establecerse aquí? Eso supondría un verdadero alivio. Sí, por supuesto, su tía es una especie de garantía; estoy convencido de que uno puede fiarse de ella. Claro, es una vieja florentina, y cuando digo vieja lo hago en sentido literal; nada que ver con estos forasteros modernos. Ella es de la época de los Médici, debió de presenciar la quema de Savonarola, y no me extrañaría que hubiese echado un puñado de astillas a la hoguera. Su rostro recuerda mucho a los de algunos cuadros antiguos: esos rostros diminutos, adustos y definidos que debieron de tener una expresión intensa, aunque casi siempre la misma. Hasta podría mostrarle un retrato suyo en un fresco de Ghirlandaio. Confío en que no le moleste que hable así de su tía… ¿no será así? Tengo la impresión de que no. Tal vez piense usted incluso peor, pero le aseguro que no es mi intención faltarles al respeto, a ninguna de las dos. Soy un gran admirador de su tía, créame.

Mientras el anfitrión de Isabel se esforzaba en entretenerla de esta manera un tanto confidencial, ella de vez en cuando dirigía la mirada a madame Merle y recibía una sonrisa distraída en respuesta, en la que en esta ocasión no había ninguna indicación inoportuna de que nuestra heroína estuviera luciéndose. Madame Merle, finalmente, propuso a la condesa Gemini salir al jardín, y esta, tras ponerse en pie y ahuecar el plumaje, se encaminó hacia la puerta.

—¡Pobre señorita Archer! —exclamó mientras examinaba al otro grupo con expresión compasiva—. ¡Qué forma de meterla en la familia!

—La señorita Archer no podría sentir otra cosa que simpatía hacia una familia a la que tú pertenezcas —respondió el señor Osmond con una carcajada que, pese a tener cierto deje burlón, no estaba exenta de una refinada paciencia.

—¡No sé qué quieres decir con eso! Estoy segura de que no pensará mal de mí, a no ser por lo que tú le cuentes. Yo soy mejor de lo que él le diga, señorita Archer —prosiguió la condesa—. No soy más que una tonta y una aburrida. ¿Es eso todo lo que le ha dicho? ¿Sí? Pues, en ese caso, se ve que lo pone usted de buen humor. ¿Ha empezado a hablarle de alguno de sus temas preferidos? Porque le advierto que hay un par de ellos que siempre trata *à fond*. Si empieza, más vale que vaya usted despojándose del sombrero.

—No creo que yo sepa cuáles son los temas preferidos del señor Osmond —dijo Isabel, que se había puesto de pie.

La condesa, por un instante, adoptó una actitud de profunda reflexión, apretando contra la frente las puntas de los dedos de una mano.

—Se lo digo en un momento. Uno es Maquiavelo, otro Vittoria Colonna; y después está Metastasio.

—Pues conmigo —dijo madame Merle al tiempo que enlazaba con su brazo el de la condesa Gemini como para guiar sus pasos hacia el jardín—, el señor Osmond no se muestra nunca tan histórico.

—Ya —respondió la condesa mientras se alejaban—, pero es que usted es Maquiavelo en persona, la mismísima Vittoria Colonna.

—Solo nos falta por oír que la pobre madame Merle es Metastasio —dijo Gilbert Osmond, con un suspiro de resignación.

Isabel se había levantado al creer que también ellos iban a salir al jardín; pero su anfitrión permaneció quieto, con las manos en los bolsillos de la chaqueta, sin dar muestra alguna de querer abandonar la estancia, mientras que su hija, que se había colgado del brazo de su padre, alzaba la vista y pasaba la mirada del rostro de él al de Isabel, que estaba a la espera, con cierta satisfacción íntima, de que dirigiesen sus pasos. Le agradaba la conversación del señor Osmond, su compañía, y en aquel momento sentía algo que siempre le producía una íntima emoción: la conciencia de iniciar una nueva relación. A través de las puertas abiertas de la amplia estancia, vio a madame Merle y a la condesa recorriendo el hermoso césped del jardín; se volvió entonces y paseó la mirada por los objetos que había diseminados a su alrededor. Según lo acordado, el señor Osmond iba a mostrarle sus tesoros, y todos sus cuadros y vitrinas parecían serlo. Tras un momento, Isabel se aproximó a uno de los cuadros para verlo de cerca, pero sin darle tiempo a hacerlo él le preguntó de improviso:

—¿Qué opina de mi hermana, señorita Archer?

Isabel se giró hacia él un tanto sorprendida.

—No me pregunte eso, se lo ruego. Apenas he visto a su hermana unos instantes.

—Sí, la ha visto muy poco, pero ha debido de observar que tampoco tiene gran cosa que ver. ¿Qué opina del tono general de nuestra familia? —prosiguió con su impertérrita sonrisa—. Me gustaría saber qué impresión causa en una mente fresca y libre de prejuicios. Sé lo que va a decirme, que apenas ha tenido tiempo de atisbarlo. Pero, si tiene ocasión, no deje de fijarse de ahora en adelante. A veces pienso que hemos tomado el camino equivocado al vivir aquí, rodeados de cosas y de personas que nos son ajenas, sin responsabilidades ni ataduras, sin nada que nos una ni nos sostenga; casándonos con extranjeros, adquiriendo gustos artificiales, escabulléndonos del que era nuestro destino natural. Permítame añadir que esto lo digo mucho más por mí que por mi hermana. Ella es una dama muy honrada, mucho más de lo que aparenta. Es bastante infeliz, y como su carácter no es serio, no suele mostrarlo trágicamente; en lugar de eso, lo hace de forma cómica. Tiene un marido espantoso, aunque no estoy muy seguro de que se aproveche de esa circunstancia. Está claro, de todos modos, que un marido espantoso resulta muy inconveniente. Madame Merle le da excelentes consejos, pero es en gran medida como darle a un niño un diccionario para que aprenda un idioma con él. Sabe buscar las palabras, pero es incapaz de unirlas entre sí. Mi hermana necesita una gramática, pero, por desgracia, no tiene conciencia gramatical. Perdone que la moleste con estos detalles; mi hermana estaba muy en lo cierto al decir que la habíamos metido de lleno en la familia. Deje que descuelgue ese cuadro, necesita verlo a la luz.

Descolgó el cuadro, lo llevó hasta la ventana y relató una serie de hechos curiosos en relación con el mismo. Isabel examinó el resto de las obras de arte, y su anfitrión le fue proporcionando la información que parecía más adecuada para una joven dama que ha ido de visita una tarde de verano. Sus cuadros, medallones y tapices eran de interés, pero, transcurrido un tiempo, Isabel pensó que el propietario de los mismos resultaba mucho más interesante aún, y con independencia de ellos, por muy presentes que parecieran estar en su vida. No se parecía a nadie que ella conociese; la mayoría de sus conocidos podían ser divididos en grupos de media docena de especímenes cada uno.

Había una o dos excepciones a esa regla; por ejemplo, le resultaba imposible imaginar un grupo que incluyese a su tía Lydia. Había además otra serie de personas que eran, hablando en términos relativos, originales, que se podría decir que tenían una originalidad concedida por cortesía, como el señor Goodwood, su primo Ralph, Henrietta Stackpole, lord Warburton y madame Merle. Pero en lo esencial, si se los examinaba con detenimiento, aquellos individuos pertenecían a los tipos que ya tenía presentes en su mente. Para quien su mente no tenía un lugar natural era para el señor Osmond: era un espécimen aparte. No es que reconociese todas esas verdades al momento, sino que, poco a poco, iba encajándolas en su lugar. Por el momento, lo único que se dijo a sí misma fue que aquella «nueva relación» quizá hiciese de ella alguien realmente distinguido. Madame Merle había tenido también esa cualidad que hace a uno especial, pero ¡qué fuerza adquiría de inmediato cuando era un hombre el que la poseía! No se trataba tanto de lo que hacía o decía, sino más bien de lo que se guardaba para sí, lo que en opinión de Isabel le imprimía la marca de singularidad, como uno de esos signos tan curiosos que le estaba mostrando en la parte de atrás de las antiguas placas y en las esquinas de los dibujos del siglo XVI: y todo ello sin caer en inflexiones claramente diferenciadas del uso común, resultaba original sin ser excéntrico. Jamás había conocido a una persona con ese grado de refinamiento. Para empezar, tal peculiaridad era física, pero se extendía a cosas impalpables. Su cabello espeso y fino, sus facciones esculpidas a cincel, su tez clara, curtida sin resultar basta, la barba que crecía perfectamente igualada y los dedos ligeros, esbeltos y suaves que convertían el movimiento de uno solo de ellos en un gesto lleno de expresividad… para nuestra sensible joven, esos rasgos personales eran signos de calidad, de intensidad, prometían en cierto modo despertar el interés. No cabía duda de que era exigente y crítico; muy probablemente fuese irritable. La sensibilidad había regido su persona, puede que en demasía; hacía que se impacientase ante los problemas vulgares y lo había empujado a vivir aislado, en un mundo lleno de orden y equilibrio, y a dedicarse a pensar en el arte y la belleza, en la historia. Se había guiado por su gusto en todo, y quizá únicamente por su gusto, como un enfermo que, consciente de que su mal es incurable, no consulta al final más que a su abogado: eso era lo que lo hacía tan distinto del resto de la gente. Ralph tenía algo de aquella misma cualidad, ese aire de pensar que la vida es cuestión de los entendidos; pero en Ralph era una anomalía, una suerte de excrescencia humorística, mientras que en el señor Osmond era la clave principal, y todo lo demás estaba en armonía con ella. Isabel estaba aún muy lejos de entenderlo por completo; no siempre resultaba obvio el sentido de sus palabras. Era difícil entender, por ejemplo, qué quería decir al hablar de su lado provinciano, que era precisamente un aspecto del que ella habría asegurado que carecía por completo. ¿Se trataba acaso de una inocente paradoja cuyo propósito era desconcertarla? ¿O de la muestra más refinada de su exquisita cultura? Confiaba en descubrirlo con el tiempo, ya que prometía ser algo muy interesante de averiguar. Si era provinciano estar rodeado de tanta armonía, ¿en qué consistía entonces el refinamiento de la capital? Isabel se veía capaz de plantear dicha cuestión, pese a estar convencida de que su anfitrión era una persona tímida, pues una timidez como la suya, fruto de unos nervios a flor de piel y de una aguda percepción, era perfectamente compatible con la mejor crianza. Es más, era prácticamente una demostración de unos valores y unas pautas fuera de lo común; sin duda, tenía el convencimiento de que la gente vulgar era la primera en hacerse notar. No era un hombre que demostrase una confianza excesiva en sí mismo, que se dedicase a charlar y cotillear con la ligereza propia de un carácter superficial; era tan crítico consigo mismo como lo era con los demás, y, puesto que se mostraba muy exigente con los demás antes de considerarlos agradables, tendría con toda probabilidad una opinión muy irónica de lo que él mismo podía ofrecer: una prueba más de que no era un presuntuoso sin remedio. De no ser tímido, no habría podido lograr aquella superación sutil, gradual y triunfante de su timidez, que era lo que a la vez le atraía y le confundía de él. Si le había preguntado de improviso qué pensaba de la condesa Gemini, era sin duda prueba de que sentía interés hacia Isabel; difícilmente habría necesitado ayuda para conocer a su propia hermana. Y si bien el hecho de mostrarse tan interesado era indicativo de una mente curiosa, no dejaba de ser un tanto peculiar que sacrificase sus sentimientos fraternales a su curiosidad. Eso era lo más excéntrico de cuanto había hecho.

Además de la estancia en que la habían recibido, había otras dos más, igualmente repletas de objetos, en las que Isabel pasó un cuarto de hora. Todo en ellas era sumamente curioso y de enorme valor, y el señor Osmond siguió mostrándose como el más amable de los cicerones al conducirla de una pieza a otra, sin soltar en ningún momento la mano de su hija. Su amabilidad casi sorprendió a nuestra joven amiga, quien se preguntaba por qué razón se tomaba tantas molestias con ella; y al final, acabó por sentirse abrumada ante todo aquel cúmulo de belleza y conocimiento al que se vio expuesta. Por el momento ya había tenido suficiente y había dejado de atender a lo que él decía. Pese a mirarlo con ojos atentos, no pensaba en las palabras que le dirigía. Probablemente él la creyese más despierta, más inteligente en todos los aspectos, más preparada de lo que estaba. Llevada por su amabilidad, madame Merle

seguramente habría exagerado, lo cual era una lástima porque, al final, él acabaría por descubrirlo, y puede que entonces su inteligencia real no bastase para que Osmond se perdonase la equivocación. Parte de la fatiga que Isabel sentía se debía al esfuerzo por parecer tan inteligente como imaginaba que madame Merle la había descrito, y al temor (muy poco habitual en ella) de dejar al descubierto no su ignorancia, que en comparación le importaba muy poco, sino una posible carencia de finura en la percepción. Le habría horrorizado manifestar su gusto por algo que él, dado su conocimiento superior, considerase que no debía gustarle; o bien pasar por alto aquello en lo que se habría fijado una mente realmente cultivada. No deseaba en absoluto caer en aquello tan grotesco que había visto hacer a muchas mujeres (y eso era una advertencia), que, sin perder la compostura, habían zozobrado de forma ignominiosa. Por lo tanto, ponía exquisito cuidado en lo que decía, así como en lo que observaba o pasaba por alto; mucho más cuidado del que hasta entonces había puesto nunca.

Regresaron a la primera estancia, donde ya habían servido el té, pero como las otras dos damas continuaban todavía en la terraza, y dado que Isabel no había disfrutado aún de las vistas, atracción principal de la casa, el señor Osmond guió sus pasos hacia el jardín sin más dilación. Madame Merle y la condesa Gemini se habían hecho llevar allí unas sillas y, como hacía una tarde preciosa, la condesa propuso que tomasen el té al aire libre. Así pues, enviaron a Pansy a avisar al criado para que sacase el servicio. El sol había descendido, la luz dorada tenía una tonalidad más intensa, y sobre las montañas y las planicies que se extendían ante ellos las sombras de color púrpura resplandecían con igual intensidad que los lugares todavía iluminados. La escena era de un encanto extraordinario. El aire mostraba una quietud casi solemne, y el amplio paisaje, con sus cultivos de aspecto ajardinado y su noble trazado, el fértil valle y las colinas apenas alteradas, con mínimas muestras de ocupación humana, se extendía ante ellos con espléndida armonía y elegancia clásica.

—Parece usted tan complacida que creo que puedo confiar en que vuelva —dijo Osmond mientras llevaba a su acompañante hasta una de las esquinas de la terraza.

—No le quepa duda de que volveré —repuso Isabel—, pese a que usted diga que es malo vivir en Italia. ¿Qué fue eso que dijo sobre la misión natural de cada uno? Me pregunto si estaría negando mi misión natural si me instalase en Florencia.

—La misión natural de una mujer es estar donde más se la aprecia.

—El problema reside en averiguar cuál es ese lugar.

—Muy cierto; a menudo la mujer pierde mucho tiempo en tal empeño. La gente debería dejárselo muy claro.

—Por lo menos en lo que a mí respecta tendría que ser así.

—En cualquier caso, me alegra oírle hablar de instalarse aquí. Madame Merle me había dado a entender que tenía usted un espíritu viajero. Creo que me habló de que tenía planes de dar la vuelta al mundo.

—Mis planes me dan bastante vergüenza, hago uno nuevo cada día.

—No veo razón para avergonzarse. Ese es el mayor de los placeres.

—A mí me parece frívolo —dijo Isabel—. Una debería elegir tras mucha deliberación, y mantenerse fiel a lo elegido.

—Según ese criterio, entonces yo no soy frívolo.

—¿No ha hecho nunca planes?

—Sí, años atrás, hice uno, y todavía hoy lo sigo.

—Debe de haber sido un plan muy agradable —se atrevió a observar Isabel.

—Era muy sencillo. Consistía en vivir lo más tranquilo posible.

—¿Tranquilo? —repitió la joven.

—Sí, sin preocuparme, sin esforzarme ni luchar por alcanzar nada. Resignarme. Contentarme con poco. —Pronunció despacio aquellas frases, haciendo breves pausas entre ellas, y clavando sus ojos inteligentes en los de su interlocutora, con la plena conciencia del hombre que se decide a hacer una confesión.

—¿Y llama usted simple a eso? —preguntó ella con leve ironía.

—Sí, porque es algo negativo.

—¿Es que es negativa su vida?

—Llámela afirmativa si prefiere. Pero lo único que ha afirmado es mi indiferencia. Y conste que no hablo de una indiferencia innata, porque carecía de ella, sino de una renuncia voluntaria y premeditada.

Isabel apenas entendía lo que le estaba diciendo, no estaba segura de si hablaba en serio o no. ¿Por qué razón iba a mostrarse de repente tan abierto un hombre que le daba la impresión de ser tan reservado? No obstante, eso era

asunto de él, y sus confidencias resultaban interesantes.

—No veo por qué tenía usted que renunciar —dijo al cabo de un momento.

—Porque no podía hacer nada. No tenía perspectivas, era pobre y no era ningún genio. Tampoco tenía talento, me di cuenta muy pronto. Era simplemente el joven más disconforme de la tierra. Había dos o tres personas en el mundo que despertaban mi envidia: el zar de Rusia, por ejemplo, y el sultán de Turquía. Hubo incluso momentos en los que llegué a envidiar al Papa de Roma, por el respeto de que goza. Me habría encantado que me tratasen con igual consideración, pero como eso era imposible y no estaba dispuesto a conformarme con menos, decidí no aspirar a ningún tipo de honores. Hasta el caballero más necesitado puede siempre respetarse a sí mismo, y por fortuna, aunque necesitado, yo era un caballero. No podía hacer nada en Italia, ni siquiera podía ser un patriota italiano. Para serlo, tendría que haberme ido del país, y estaba demasiado encariñado con él para abandonarlo, por no mencionar lo mucho que Italia, en general, me satisfacía entonces, tal como era, para sentir deseos de cambiarla. Así que llevo muchos años aquí, siguiendo el plan de vida tranquila que le he mencionado, y no he sido en absoluto infeliz. No quiero decir que no me haya preocupado de nada, pero las cosas por las que me he preocupado han sido definidas, limitadas. Los acontecimientos de mi vida han pasado por completo inadvertidos para todo el mundo, excepto para mí mismo: comprar un crucifijo antiguo de plata a precio de ganga (por supuesto, jamás he comprado nada caro), o descubrir, como hice en cierta ocasión, un boceto de Correggio en una tabla sobre la que algún idiota inspirado había pintarrajeado encima.

Habría sido este un relato muy árido de la trayectoria del señor Osmond si Isabel se lo hubiera creído a pies juntillas, pero su imaginación se encargó de suplir el elemento humano que estaba convencida que no había faltado. La vida de Osmond se había entrecruzado con la de otras personas más de lo que él estaba dispuesto a reconocer, pero, como era natural, ella no podía esperar que entrase en detalles así. Por el momento, se abstenía de forzarle a más revelaciones. Insinuar que no se lo había contado todo habría sido una muestra de mayor familiaridad y de menor consideración de las que ahora quería mostrarle; de hecho, habría sido de una vulgaridad escandalosa. Lo cierto era que ya le había contado más que suficiente. No obstante, en aquel momento se sintió inclinada a expresarle una admiración controlada por haber conseguido preservar su independencia.

—¡Qué vida más placentera —dijo—, renunciar a todo menos a Correggio!

—Bueno, a mi manera, he conseguido sacarle provecho. No piense que me estoy quejando. Si uno no es feliz es por culpa suya.

Aquello era demasiado elevado e Isabel prefería algo más cotidiano.

—¿Ha vivido siempre aquí?

—No, no siempre. Viví mucho tiempo en Nápoles, y pasé muchos años en Roma. Pero ya llevo aquí una larga temporada. Aunque quizá tenga que cambiar de aires, hacer algo distinto. Ahora ya no puedo pensar solo en mí. Mi hija está creciendo y es muy probable que los Correggios y los crucifijos no le interesen tanto como a mí. Tendré que hacer lo que sea mejor para Pansy.

—Sí, hágalo —dijo Isabel—. Es una niña encantadora.

—¡Ah, es un ángel del cielo! —exclamó Gilbert Osmond con arrobo—. ¡Es mi mayor felicidad!

25

Mientras aquel coloquio bastante íntimo continuaba (y se prolongó durante algún tiempo después de que dejásemos de seguirlo), madame Merle y su acompañante, rompiendo un silencio de cierta duración, habían iniciado un intercambio de opiniones. Estaban ambas damas acomodadas en actitud de silenciosa expectativa, especialmente en el caso de la condesa Gemini, quien, al tener un temperamento más nervioso que su amiga, no era tan ducha en el arte de ocultar su impaciencia. Lo que aquellas damas esperaban no era algo aparente y quizá tampoco estuviese muy definido en sus mentes. Madame Merle estaba a la espera de que Osmond liberase a su joven amiga de aquel *tête-à-tête*, y la condesa esperaba porque así lo hacía madame Merle. Además, la condesa, a fuerza de esperar, encontró el momento oportuno para hacer uno de esos comentarios perversos tan suyos. Puede que llevase unos minutos deseándolo. Su hermano se alejó en compañía de Isabel hasta el fondo del jardín y ella los siguió con la mirada.

—Querida —observó entonces a su acompañante—, espero que me perdone si no la felicito.

—De mil amores, ya que no tengo ni idea de por qué tendría que hacerlo.

—¿Acaso no tiene usted un pequeño plan que la complace mucho? —Y la condesa señaló a la solitaria pareja con un gesto de la cabeza.

Madame Merle dirigió la mirada en la dirección indicada, y a continuación miró a su interlocutora con ojos serenos.

—Como sabe, nunca llego a entenderla muy bien —dijo con una sonrisa.

—Nadie entiende mejor que usted cuando le apetece hacerlo. Pero veo que en este momento no es así.

—Usted me dice unas cosas que nadie más me dice —dijo madame Merle con gravedad, aunque sin dejar de sonreír.

—¿Se refiere a cosas que no le agradan? ¿No le dice Osmond a veces cosas así?

—Lo que su hermano dice tiene una razón.

—Sí, a veces una envenenada. Si lo que quiere decir es que yo no soy tan inteligente como él, no crea que afectará en lo más mínimo. Pero será mucho mejor que me entienda bien.

—¿Por qué razón? —preguntó madame Merle—. ¿Qué va a cambiar eso?

—Si yo no apruebo su plan, debería usted saberlo para darse cuenta del riesgo de que yo interfiera en él.

Madame Merle pareció a punto de reconocer que podía haber algo de razón en aquello, pero al momento dijo en voz baja:

—Me cree usted más calculadora de lo que soy.

—No son sus cálculos lo que me parece mal, sino que se equivoque al hacerlos. Y es lo que sucede en este caso.

—Debe de haber hecho unos cálculos muy a fondo para descubrirlo.

—No, no he tenido tiempo para tal cosa. Esta es la primera vez que veo a la joven —dijo la condesa—, y me he dado cuenta de repente de que me gusta mucho.

—A mí también —declaró madame Merle.

—Tiene usted una forma extraña de demostrarlo.

—Le he dado la oportunidad de conocerla a usted.

—¡De hecho —exclamó la condesa entre carcajadas—, quizá sea lo mejor que podría haberle sucedido!

Madame Merle se quedó un rato en silencio. La actitud de la condesa resultaba impertinente, pero no permitió que eso la alterase; posó la mirada en la silueta color violeta del monte Morello y se sumió en la reflexión.

—Mi querida señora —dijo al fin—, le recomiendo que no se ponga nerviosa. El asunto al que hace alusión concierne a tres personas de mucha más firmeza en sus propósitos que usted.

—¿A tres? En su caso y en el de Osmond está claro. Pero ¿tiene la señorita Archer la misma firmeza?

—Tanta como nosotros.

—Pues, en ese caso —dijo la condesa con sonrisa radiante—, si la convenzo de que le conviene oponerles resistencia, lo logrará sin problemas.

—¿Oponernos resistencia? ¿Por qué se expresa usted con tanta crudeza? No se la está obligando por la fuerza.

—Yo no estoy tan segura. Son capaces de cualquier cosa, usted y Osmond. No hablo de Osmond por su cuenta, ni de usted por la suya. Pero juntos son peligrosos… como una combinación química.

—Pues en ese caso será mejor que nos deje tranquilos —dijo madame Merle sonriendo.

—No es mi intención meterme con ustedes, pero voy a hablar con la joven.

—Mi pobre Amy —murmuró madame Merle—, no entiendo qué se le ha metido en la cabeza.

—Me intereso por ella… eso es lo que se me ha metido en la cabeza. Me gusta ella.

Madame Merle titubeó un instante.

—Pues no creo que usted le guste a ella.

La condesa abrió sus brillantes ojillos de par en par y su rostro se contrajo en una mueca.

—¡Ay, usted no necesita a nadie para ser peligrosa!

—Si quiere caerle bien, no hable mal de su hermano delante de ella.

—Supongo que no pretenderá que se haya enamorado de él en solo dos encuentros.

Madame Merle miró un instante a Isabel y al dueño de la casa. Osmond estaba apoyado en el parapeto, con el rostro vuelto hacia la joven y los brazos cruzados; y resultaba evidente que Isabel, aunque dirigiese la mirada en la otra dirección, no se dedicaba a examinar el paisaje. Mientras madame Merle la contemplaba, la joven bajó la mirada; estaba escuchando a Osmond, probablemente con un punto de embarazo, al tiempo que hundía la contera de la sombrilla en la tierra. Madame Merle se levantó de su asiento.

—Pues sí, eso es lo que creo —declaró.

Tras ser llamado por Pansy, el andrajoso criado, que por lo raído de su librea y su aspecto trasnochado podría haber salido de un boceto de usanzas de otros tiempos creado por el pincel de un Longhi o un Goya, había salido con una mesita que depositó sobre el césped, para regresar después a buscar la bandeja del té; luego había desaparecido una vez más, y había vuelto a aparecer con un par de sillones. Pansy había estado observando todas aquellas idas y venidas con sumo interés, de pie, con las manos cruzadas sobre la pechera del ligero vestido, pero no se había atrevido a prestarse a ayudar al sirviente. Sin embargo, cuando la mesa del té estuvo ya dispuesta, se aproximó con calma a su tía.

—¿Cree que papá se molestará si preparo yo el té?

La condesa la examinó con una mirada intencionadamente crítica, sin responder a su pregunta.

—Mi pobre sobrina —dijo—, ¿es ese tu mejor vestido?

—Oh, no —respondió Pansy—, este es un traje sencillo para ocasiones normales.

—¿Consideras una ocasión normal el que yo venga a visitarte? Eso por no nombrar a madame Merle y a aquella joven tan guapa de allí.

Pansy reflexionó un momento, mirando con seriedad a las personas mencionadas, primero a una y después a otra, y a continuación su rostro se iluminó con su sonrisa perfecta.

—Tengo un vestido bonito, pero hasta ese es muy sencillo. ¿Por qué iba a exhibirlo junto a las cosas preciosas que lleva usted?

—Porque es el más bonito que tienes, y siempre tienes que ponerte lo más bonito para mí. Te ruego que la próxima vez te lo pongas. Tengo la impresión de que no te visten todo lo bien que deberían.

La niña se alisó fugazmente la anticuada falda.

—Es un vestido adecuado para preparar el té, ¿no le parece? ¿Cree que papá me dejará que lo haga?

—No tengo forma de saberlo, hija mía —dijo la condesa—. No hay quien adivine las ideas de tu padre. Madame Merle las entiende mejor. Pregúntaselo a ella.

Madame Merle sonrió con su elegancia habitual.

—Es una cuestión peliaguda… déjame que lo piense. Me parece que a tu padre le agradaría ver cómo su hijita le prepara el té con esmero. Es lo que corresponde hacer a la hija de la casa cuando se hace mayor.

—¡Eso mismo creo yo, madame Merle! —exclamó Pansy—. Va a ver qué bien lo hago. Una cucharada por persona.

Y Pansy se puso a trajinar con las cosas de la mesa.

—A mí ponme dos —dijo la condesa, que, al igual que madame Merle, se quedó observando a la niña unos momentos—. Oye, Pansy —prosiguió al fin la condesa—. Me gustaría saber qué te parece tu invitada.

—No es mi invitada, es la invitada de papá —objetó Pansy.

—La señorita Archer también ha venido a verte a ti —dijo madame Merle.

—Me complace oírlo. Ha sido muy amable conmigo.

—Entonces, ¿te gusta? —preguntó la condesa.

—Es encantadora… encantadora —repitió Pansy con aquel tono suyo de niña bien educada—. Me parece realmente agradable.

—¿Y crees que a tu padre también le agrada?

—¡Por Dios, condesa! —murmuró madame Merle con ánimo disuasorio—. Ve a decirles que vengan a tomar el té —continuó, dirigiéndose a la niña.

—¡Ya verán como les gusta! —declaró Pansy, y se alejó en busca de los otros, que seguían entretenidos al fondo de la terraza.

—Si la señorita Archer va a ser su madre, es indudable que interesa saber si a la niña le gusta —dijo la condesa.

—Si su hermano se casa de nuevo, no lo hará por el bien de Pansy —replicó madame Merle—. Pronto cumplirá los dieciséis años, y a esa edad empezará a tener más necesidad de un marido que de una madrastra.

—¿Y va a encargarse también usted de buscarle marido?

—Ciertamente me interesaré por que su matrimonio sea el adecuado. E imagino que usted hará lo propio.

—¡Por supuesto que no! —exclamó la condesa—. ¿Por qué iba yo, precisamente, a darle tanta importancia a un marido?

—Usted no ha sido afortunada en su matrimonio, a eso me refería. Cuando hablo de un marido, quiero decir uno que sea bueno.

—No hay maridos buenos. Y Osmond tampoco va a serlo.

Madame Merle cerró un momento los ojos.

—No sé por qué, pero ahora mismo está usted irritada —dijo al fin—. No creo que se oponga en serio a que su hermano o su sobrina se casen cuando les llegue el momento; y en lo que a Pansy respecta, tengo el convencimiento de que algún día compartiremos el placer de buscarle marido. Sus numerosas amistades serán de gran ayuda.

—Sí, estoy irritada —respondió la condesa—. Usted logra irritarme a menudo. Y su frialdad me resulta increíble. Es usted una mujer extraña.

—Sería mucho mejor que siempre actuásemos de acuerdo —prosiguió madame Merle.

—¿Es eso una amenaza? —preguntó la condesa poniéndose en pie.

Madame Merle, con aire divertido, negó con la cabeza.

—¡Está muy claro que no comparte usted mi frialdad!

En ese momento, Isabel y el señor Osmond se aproximaban lentamente hacia ellas. Isabel había cogido a Pansy de la mano.

—No pretenderá creer que él va a hacerla feliz.

—Si se casa con la señorita Archer, supongo que se comportará como un caballero.

La condesa hizo una serie de movimientos nerviosos, adoptando una postura tras otra.

—¿Se refiere a como se comportan la mayoría de los caballeros? ¡Pues sí que sería de agradecer! Por supuesto que Osmond es un caballero; no hay necesidad de recordárselo a su propia hermana. Pero ¿cree él que puede casarse con cualquier joven que se le ocurra elegir? Osmond es un caballero, claro que sí; pero debo decir que nunca he conocido a nadie con las pretensiones de Osmond. En qué se fundan, no tengo ni idea. Soy su hermana, y se supone que yo debería saberlo. ¿Quién se cree que es? ¿Qué ha hecho en la vida? Si hubiese algo especial en sus orígenes, si estuviese hecho de un barro especial, imagino que yo tendría alguna noción. Si nuestra familia hubiera disfrutado de grandes honores o de sumo esplendor, está claro que yo les habría sacado partido: me habrían venido de maravilla. Pero es que no hay nada, nada de nada. Nuestros padres eran gente encantadora, por supuesto; pero no dudo de que los suyos también lo fuesen. Hoy día todo el mundo es encantador. Hasta yo soy una persona encantadora. No se ría, que conste que lo han dicho. Y en lo que a Osmond respecta, siempre ha dado la impresión de creerse que descendía de los dioses.

—Puede usted decir lo que guste —dijo madame Merle, que había escuchado aquel rápido discurso con la mayor atención, pese a que podría parecer lo contrario, ya que había apartado la vista de su interlocutora y tenía las manos ocupadas en ajustar las lazadas de su vestido—. Pero ustedes, los Osmond, son de buena raza: su sangre debe de brotar de un manantial de gran pureza. Su hermano, como hombre inteligente que es, siempre ha tenido dicho convencimiento pese a carecer de pruebas. Usted es modesta al respecto, pero también es persona de gran distinción. ¿Y qué me dice de su sobrina? Esa niña es una princesita. No obstante —añadió madame Merle—, no le va a resultar fácil a Osmond casarse con la señorita Archer. Pero al menos puede intentarlo.

—Pues yo espero que ella lo rechace. Así se le bajarán un poco los humos.

—No debemos olvidar que es uno de los hombres más inteligentes que existen.

—Ya la he oído antes decir eso, pero aún no he conseguido averiguar qué es lo que ha hecho.

—¿Que qué ha hecho? Pues no ha hecho nada que haya tenido que deshacer. Y ha sabido esperar.

—¿Esperar al dinero de la señorita Archer? ¿De cuánto estamos hablando?

—No me estaba refiriendo a eso —dijo madame Merle—. La señorita Archer tiene setenta mil libras.

—Vaya, es una lástima que sea tan encantadora —declaró la condesa—. Si lo que se trata es de sacrificarla, cualquier joven habría valido. No hacía falta alguien de tanta categoría.

—Si no tuviese categoría, su hermano jamás la habría mirado. Él solo quiere lo mejor.

—Sí —replicó la condesa mientras avanzaban unos pasos para ir al encuentro de los otros—, es muy difícil de contentar. Por eso me echo a temblar cuando pienso en la felicidad de esa joven.

26

Gilbert Osmond volvió a visitar a Isabel; esto es, fue al palazzo Crescentini. Tenía también otras amistades en aquel lugar, y siempre mostraba un comportamiento irreprochable con la señora Touchett y madame Merle, pero la primera de estas damas reparó en el hecho de que, en tan solo dos semanas, había ido de visita en cinco ocasiones, y comparó aquello con otro hecho que no tuvo dificultad en recordar. Hasta entonces, dos visitas al año habían sido el tributo habitual que Osmond rendía a la señora Touchett, quien había advertido que nunca elegía para tales visitas aquellos momentos, repetidos casi con periodicidad, en los que madame Merle se encontraba bajo su techo. No era madame Merle la razón de sus visitas; aquellos dos eran viejos amigos y él jamás haría ningún esfuerzo especial por verla. A Ralph no le tenía simpatía, el propio interesado se lo había comentado, y no resultaba muy creíble que el señor Osmond sintiese un repentino interés por su hijo. Ralph era imperturbable; mantenía una especie de urbanidad holgada con la que se cubría como si de un gabán mal ajustado se tratase, pero de la que nunca se despojaba. El joven consideraba a Osmond muy buena compañía y en todo momento estaba dispuesto a brindarle su hospitalidad. Pero no se hacía ilusiones pensando que las visitas de Osmond se debieran al deseo de reparar injusticias pasadas; veía la situación con total claridad: Isabel era la atracción, y, con toda justicia, motivo más que suficiente. Osmond era un crítico, un estudioso de lo exquisito, y era natural que sintiese curiosidad ante una aparición tan poco común. Por eso, cuando su madre le comentó que las intenciones del señor Osmond se veían a las claras, la respuesta de Ralph fue que él compartía por completo su opinión. Desde hacía ya mucho tiempo, la señora Touchett había encontrado un hueco para el señor Osmond en su reducida lista de amistades, aunque se preguntase vagamente por medio de qué artes y maniobras (tan negativas como ingeniosas) él se las habría arreglado para imponer tan eficazmente su presencia en todas partes. Como jamás había sido un visitante inoportuno, no había dado ocasión de resultar ofensivo, y lo que lo hacía atractivo a ojos de la señora Touchett era la sensación que daba Osmond de poder prescindir de ella en igual medida que ella podía prescindir de él, virtud esta que, por muy raro que parezca, era para la señora Touchett base suficiente para establecer una relación entre ambos. No obstante, no le produjo ninguna satisfacción pensar que se le había metido en la cabeza casarse con su sobrina. Una unión así, por parte de Isabel, resultaría de una perversidad un tanto morbosa. A la señora Touchett no se le olvidaba fácilmente que la joven había rechazado a un noble inglés, y que una muchacha con la que ni siquiera lord Warburton había triunfado se contentase con un oscuro diletante estadounidense, un viudo de mediana edad, padre de una misteriosa niña y con dudosos recursos, no respondía en absoluto a la idea que la señora Touchett tenía del éxito. Como podemos observar, la visión que dicha dama tenía del matrimonio era política, no sentimental, un punto de vista que siempre ha tenido mucho a su favor para resultar recomendable.

—Espero que tu prima no cometa la locura de escucharle —le dijo a su hijo.

A lo que Ralph respondió que una cosa era que Isabel le escuchase, y otra muy distinta que le respondiese. Sabía que Isabel había escuchado a varios partidos, como hubiera dicho su padre, pero que, a cambio, les había obligado a escucharla a ella; y le resultaba sumamente divertido que en los pocos meses transcurridos desde que la conocía apareciese ya un nuevo pretendiente por la puerta. Había sido deseo de Isabel conocer la vida, y la fortuna la estaba ayudando en su propósito: toda una sucesión de respetables caballeros hincándose de rodillas ante ella serviría tan bien como cualquier otra cosa. Ralph aguardaba con impaciencia la aparición de un cuarto, de un quinto, y hasta de un décimo pretendiente, puesto que no estaba convencido de que parase en el tercero. Dejaría la puerta entreabierta y se prestaría a parlamentar; pero estaba claro que no iba a franquear la entrada al número tres. Ralph expresó dicha opinión, más o menos en estos términos, a su madre, quien se lo quedó mirando como si se hubiese vuelto loco. Tenía una forma tan imaginativa y colorista de decir las cosas que era como si le estuviese hablando en el lenguaje de los sordomudos.

—Creo que no entiendo lo que dices —dijo—; utilizas demasiadas figuras retóricas y nunca he sido capaz de entender las alegorías. Las dos palabras del idioma que más respeto son Sí y No. Si Isabel quiere casarse con el señor Osmond, lo hará a pesar de todos tus símiles. Deja que sea ella la que encuentre el apropiado para cualquier cosa que se proponga. Sé muy poco del joven de Estados Unidos; no creo que tu prima dedique mucho tiempo a pensar en él, y

sospecho que ya se habrá cansado de esperarla. Si ella lo contempla desde un cierto punto de vista, no hay nada en el mundo que impida a Isabel casarse con el señor Osmond. Y eso está muy bien: no hay nadie que apruebe más que yo que una se complazca a sí misma. Pero es que a ella le complacen cosas muy extrañas: es capaz de casarse con el señor Osmond por el preciosismo de sus ideas o por el autógrafo que tiene de Miguel Ángel. Quiere mostrarse desinteresada… ¡como si fuese la única que estuviese en peligro de no serlo! ¿Es que va a mostrarse él igual de desinteresado cuando pueda disfrutar del dinero de Isabel? Esa era la idea de Isabel antes de que muriese tu padre, y desde entonces ha ido adquiriendo mayor atractivo para ella. Debería casarse con alguien de cuyo desinterés estuviese segura, y la mejor prueba de eso sería que el pretendiente contase con fortuna propia.

—Mi querida madre, yo no tengo miedo —respondió Ralph—. Isabel nos está engañando a todos. Va a hacer lo que le plazca, eso por descontado; pero lo hará tras estudiar muy de cerca la naturaleza humana y sin renunciar a su libertad por ello. Ha iniciado una expedición de exploración, y no creo que, nada más comenzar, cambie de rumbo ante una señal de Gilbert Osmond. Puede que haya aminorado la marcha durante una hora, pero antes de que nos demos cuenta avanzará de nuevo a toda vela. Y perdóname por utilizar una nueva metáfora.

Tal vez la señora Touchett lo perdonase, pero no se sintió lo suficientemente tranquila para ocultar sus temores a madame Merle.

—Usted, que todo lo sabe —dijo—, debe de saber esto: si es cierto que ese extraño personaje está cortejando a mi sobrina.

—¿Gilbert Osmond? —Madame Merle abrió los ojos de par en par, y con plena conciencia exclamó—: ¡Dios nos asista! ¡Menuda idea!

—¿Es que no se le había ocurrido?

—Me hace sentir usted como una idiota, pero le confieso que no. Me pregunto —añadió— si también se le habrá ocurrido a Isabel.

—Pues pienso preguntárselo de inmediato —dijo la señora Touchett.

—No le meta ideas en la cabeza —dijo madame Merle tras una reflexión—. Lo suyo sería preguntárselo al señor Osmond.

—Yo no puedo hacer semejante cosa —dijo la señora Touchett—. No voy a arriesgarme a que él me pregunte, cosa muy probable con esos aires que gasta, y dada la situación de Isabel, que si es asunto de mi incumbencia.

—Se lo preguntaré yo —declaró madame Merle con valentía.

—Pero ¿no le responderá que tampoco es asunto que le concierne a usted?

—Precisamente porque no es asunto que me concierna en absoluto es por lo que puedo permitirme hablar. Al ser yo la que menos tiene que ver con la cuestión, puede responderme lo que le parezca. Pero por su forma de responder me enteraré de sus intenciones.

—En ese caso, le ruego que me haga saber el resultado de sus indagaciones —dijo la señora Touchett—. Y ya que no puedo hablar con él, lo que sí haré será hablar con Isabel.

Al oír aquellas palabras, su interlocutora quiso hacerle una advertencia.

—No sea demasiado explícita con ella. No avive su imaginación.

—Jamás he avivado la imaginación de nadie. Pero estoy segura de que ella siempre hará algo… algo que yo no haría.

—No, a usted no le gustaría —dijo madame Merle dándolo por sentado.

—¿Y por qué tendría que gustarme, si se puede saber? El señor Osmond no tiene nada mínimamente sólido que ofrecer.

Madame Merle guardó silencio de nuevo, al tiempo que una sonrisa pensativa elevaba la comisura de sus labios y los ladeaba hacia la izquierda, proporcionándole mayor encanto de lo habitual.

—No nos confundamos. Está claro que Gilbert Osmond no es ningún advenedizo. Es un hombre que en condiciones favorables es capaz de causar muy buena impresión. Por lo que yo sé, en más de una ocasión ha sido así.

—No me cuente sus líos amorosos, probablemente de lo más calculados. ¡Me traen sin cuidado! —exclamó la señora Touchett—. Por eso que me dice es precisamente por lo que quiero que cesen sus visitas. Que yo sepa, no tiene nada más en este mundo que una o dos decenas de cuadros de los maestros primitivos y una hijita más o menos petulante.

—Los maestros primitivos valen hoy en día una cantidad considerable de dinero —dijo madame Merle—, y la hija es una persona muy joven, muy inocente y totalmente inofensiva.

—Dicho de otra forma, es una chiquilla insulsa. ¿Es eso lo que quiere decir? Al carecer de fortuna, no puede esperar hacer un buen matrimonio como se hace en este país; por tanto, Isabel se verá obligada a mantenerla o a proporcionarle una dote.

—Lo más probable es que Isabel no tuviese inconveniente en mostrarse generosa con ella. Creo que le ha cogido cariño a la pobrecilla.

—¡Razón de más para que el señor Osmond se quede en su casa! De lo contrario, de aquí a una semana nos encontraremos con que mi sobrina ha llegado a la conclusión de que su misión en la vida es demostrar que una madrastra es capaz de sacrificarse, y de que, para demostrarlo, tiene antes que convertirse en una.

—Pues sería una madrastra encantadora —dijo madame Merle con una sonrisa—; pero estoy completamente de acuerdo con usted en que lo mejor es que no se precipite demasiado en decidir cuál es su misión. Cambiar la misión de uno es casi tan difícil como cambiar la forma de la nariz: están ahí, las dos, en medio del carácter y del rostro… hay que comenzar desde muy temprano. Pero voy a investigar lo que sucede y la mantendré informada.

Todo esto tenía lugar a espaldas de Isabel, que no albergaba la más mínima sospecha de que sus relaciones con el señor Osmond fuesen objeto de debate. Madame Merle no le había dicho nada que la pusiese en guardia; no aludía a él con mayor interés del que mostraba por los demás caballeros de Florencia, tanto extranjeros como nativos, que ahora venían en número considerable a presentar sus respetos a la tía de la señorita Archer. Isabel lo consideraba un hombre interesante; esa era la idea que se había hecho desde un principio, y así era como le gustaba pensar en él. De su visita a la casa de la colina se había traído una imagen que no se había visto alterada por sus posteriores encuentros con él y que estaba investida de una particular armonía en relación con otras cosas que suponía o adivinaba, con historias dentro de otras historias: con la imagen de un hombre distinguido, sensible, inteligente y discreto, que paseaba por una terraza cubierta de musgo desde la que se dominaba el dulce valle del Arno y que llevaba de la mano a una niña, pura como el tañido de una campana, que hacía que la infancia cobrase una nueva luz. La imagen carecía de florituras, pero a Isabel le agradaba aquel tono tenue y la atmósfera de crepúsculo veraniego que la impregnaba. Hablaba de la clase de cuestiones personales que más hondo le llegaban; de la elección entre distintos objetos, sujetos, contactos… ¿cómo podría denominarlos…?, entre relaciones estrechas o efímeras; de una vida solitaria y dedicada al estudio en una tierra hermosa; de una antigua pena que se reavivaba de vez en cuando; de un sentimiento de orgullo tal vez desmesurado, pero que tenía un punto de nobleza; de un deseo de belleza y perfección, tan innato y a la vez tan cultivado, que su devenir parecía dibujarse allí abajo en aquellas vistas ordenadas, en las series de escalinatas, terrazas y fuentes que conforman un jardín italiano, sin apenas resquicio para la aridez, refrescado por un rocío natural de peculiar paternidad, un tanto ansiosa y descorazonada. Cuando estaba en el palazzo Crescentini, la actitud del señor Osmond seguía siendo la misma: desconfiado en un principio, y sin duda presa de la timidez, hacía enormes esfuerzos (que solo alguien predispuesto advertía) para superar dicha desventaja, esfuerzos que normalmente se traducían en una conversación fluida, amena, muy positiva, un tanto agresiva, pero siempre sugerente. La conversación del señor Osmond no se veía lastrada por el deseo de sobresalir; Isabel no tenía dificultad alguna en creer sincera a una persona que daba tantas muestras de poseer firmes convicciones, como, por ejemplo, cuando apreciaba de forma explícita y elegante cualquier cosa que se dijese en apoyo de sus tesis, sobre todo si quien lo hacía era la propia señorita Archer. A la joven seguía gustándole el hecho de que, si bien era cierto que hablaba por puro placer, no lo hacía para causar efecto. Exponía sus ideas como si, por muy extrañas que con frecuencia resultasen, estuviese habituado a ellas y hubiese vivido siempre con ellas, como si fuesen puños antiguos y bruñidos, bolas y cabezas de materiales preciados, susceptibles si hubiese necesidad de encajarlos en bastones nuevos, y no varas arrancadas con indolencia de cualquier árbol y enarboladas después con pretenciosa elegancia. Un día apareció con su hija, e Isabel se alegró de ver de nuevo a la jovencita, que, al ofrecer la frente a todos los presentes para que la besasen, le recordó de forma vívida el personaje de la *ingénue* de la comedia francesa. Isabel no había conocido nunca a una jovencita de ese estilo: las jovencitas estadounidenses eran muy distintas, como lo eran asimismo las doncellas de Inglaterra. Pansy estaba perfectamente formada y dispuesta para su pequeño papel en el mundo; sin embargo, su carácter, como bien se podía apreciar, era muy inocente e infantil. La jovencita estaba sentada en el sofá al lado de Isabel; llevaba puesto un manto de seda gruesa y un par de aquellos útiles guantes que madame Merle le había regalado, de color gris y con un único botón. Era como una página en blanco, la *jeune fille* ideal de la ficción europea. Isabel albergaba la esperanza de que una página tan lisa y bella como aquella acabase cubierta por un texto edificante.

La condesa Gemini también acudió a visitarla, pero ella era harina de otro costal. En este caso la página no estaba

en blanco, sino que aparecía escrita con distintas caligrafías, y la señora Touchett, que no se sentía nada honrada por su visita, declaró que con solo mirarla se advertían en ella toda una serie de inequívocos borrones. Es más, la condesa Gemini fue el motivo de una leve discusión entre la señora de la casa y su visitante venida de Roma, en la que madame Merle (que no era tan incauta como para irritar a la gente manifestando siempre su aquiescencia) se aprovechó con humor del permiso para disentir que su anfitriona permitía utilizar a los demás con la misma holgura con que lo hacía ella. La señora Touchett había declarado que le parecía un auténtico atrevimiento que la condesa Gemini se presentase en aquel momento a las puertas del palazzo Crescentini, en una casa en la que, como bien debía de saber desde hacía tiempo, se la tenía en tan poca estima. Isabel estaba al corriente de la opinión que prevalecía bajo aquel techo, según la cual la hermana del señor Osmond era una dama que había cometido tantos desmanes que ya ni siquiera eran tenidos en cuenta —que es por lo general lo que se busca—, y que ya no era sino los pecios flotantes de un conocido naufragio, como un tema incómodo de conversación en sociedad. Su madre —una persona mucho más administradora, con una debilidad por los títulos extranjeros de la que su hija, para hacerle justicia, a estas alturas era probable que se hubiese desprendido—, la había casado con un noble italiano que tal vez le había ofrecido pretextos para acallar los remordimientos de su devaneos. La condesa, sin embargo, se había consolado en demasía, y la lista de sus excusas se había perdido en el laberinto de sus aventuras. La señora Touchett jamás había accedido a recibirla, pese a que la condesa llevaba mucho tiempo intentándolo. Florencia no era una ciudad precisamente austera, pero, como decía la señora Touchett, en algún punto tenía que trazar la línea divisoria.

Madame Merle defendía a la infeliz dama con grandes dosis de celo e ingenio. No veía por qué razón tenía la señora Touchett que convertir en chivo expiatorio a la pobre condesa Gemini, que en realidad no había hecho daño alguno, que tan solo había hecho el bien de forma equivocada. Era indudable que había que trazar una línea divisoria, pero de hacerlo, había que dibujarla: era demasiado torcida una línea que dejara fuera a la condesa Gemini. En ese caso, lo mejor que podía hacer la señora Touchett era cerrar su casa a cal y canto; tal vez fuese la mejor medida mientras la dama permaneciese en Florencia. Había que ser justo y no establecer diferencias arbitrarias. Estaba claro que la condesa había sido imprudente; no había sido tan inteligente como otras mujeres. Era una buena persona que no tenía nada de inteligente. Pero ¿desde cuándo era eso motivo para ser excluido de la buena sociedad? Hacía muchísimo tiempo que no se comentaba nada de ella, y qué mejor prueba podía haber de que había renunciado a los malos hábitos que aquel deseo de convertirse en miembro del círculo de la señora Touchett. Isabel no tenía nada que aportar a aquella interesante disputa, ni siquiera su paciente atención, y se limitó a dar una cálida bienvenida a la condesa Gemini, quien, por muchos defectos que tuviese, al menos contaba con el mérito de ser la hermana del señor Osmond. Como el hermano sí le agradaba, Isabel pensó que lo correcto era tratar de que la hermana también le gustase; a pesar de sentirse cada vez más perpleja ante los acontecimientos, era aún perfectamente capaz de seguir una secuencia lógica tan primitiva. La impresión que la condesa le había causado cuando la conoció en la villa no había sido la más favorable, pero agradecía que se le diese la oportunidad de reparar aquel accidente. ¿Acaso no había declarado el señor Osmond que era una buena mujer? Viniendo de Gilbert Osmond, dicha afirmación resultaba un tanto burda, pero madame Merle la había mejorado al recubrirla de cierto barniz. Le había contado a Isabel más de la pobre condesa que el señor Osmond, y relatado la historia de su matrimonio y las consecuencias que de él se habían derivado. El conde Gemini era miembro de una antigua familia toscana, pero tan pobre que había aceptado a Amy Osmond, a pesar de no ser una gran belleza, por la modesta dote que la madre ofrecía, una suma equivalente a la parte del patrimonio familiar que su hermano ya había recibido. El conde Gemini, sin embargo, había heredado dinero desde entonces, y ahora, en términos italianos, disfrutaban de una situación desahogada, pese a que Amy era una auténtica manirrota. El conde era un ser de baja catadura moral, y le había dado a su esposa motivos más que sobrados de ello. La condesa no tenía hijos; había perdido tres antes de que cumpliesen el primer año. La madre de la condesa, que había tenido pretensiones culturales, escribía poemas descriptivos y publicaba crónicas sobre temas italianos en semanarios ingleses. La dama en cuestión había fallecido tres años después de que la condesa contrajese matrimonio, mientras que el padre, perdido en el gris amanecer americano del momento, aunque considerado en principio hombre rico e indómito, había muerto mucho tiempo atrás. Y eso, en opinión de la señora Merle, era algo que se notaba en Gilbert Osmond: se apreciaba que era una mujer quien lo había criado, aunque, para hacerle justicia, se supone que debería haber sido alguien más sensato que la Corinne americana, como le gustaba a la señora Osmond que la llamasen. Había llevado a sus hijos a Italia tras la muerte del señor Osmond, y la señora Touchett la recordaba en los años posteriores a su llegada. La consideraba una snob insoportable, aunque viniendo de la señora Touchett esa opinión resultaba incoherente, ya que ella, al igual que

la señora Osmond, aprobaba los matrimonios de conveniencia. La condesa Gemini era una excelente compañía y mucho menos superficial de lo que aparentaba. Uno podía llevarse de maravilla con ella siempre que observase una regla muy simple: no creerse ni una sola palabra de lo que decía. Madame Merle, por consideración a su hermano, siempre hacía todo lo que estaba en su mano; Osmond siempre apreciaba cualquier gesto amable hacia Amy, ya que (para ser sinceros) consideraba que desprestigiaba un tanto su apellido común. Como era natural, era imposible que le agradase el estilo de la condesa, su ostentoso mal gusto, su falta de serenidad. Le desagradaba; lo ponía nervioso; no era su tipo de mujer. ¿Cuál era entonces su tipo? Pues el extremo opuesto de la condesa: una mujer para quien la verdad fuese algo sagrado. Isabel era incapaz de darse cuenta del número de mentiras que su visitante le había contado; es más, la condesa siempre le había dado la impresión de mostrar una estúpida sinceridad. Había hablado casi exclusivamente de sí misma; de cuánto le gustaría llegar a conocer a fondo a la señorita Archer; de hasta qué punto agradecería contar con una amiga de verdad; de cuán desagradable era la gente de Florencia; de lo harta que estaba del lugar; de cómo le gustaría vivir en otro sitio; en París, en Londres o en Washington; de lo imposible que resultaba encontrar en Italia algo bonito que ponerse, con la excepción de algún encaje antiguo; de lo carísimo que se estaba poniendo todo en todas partes; de la vida de sufrimientos y privaciones que había tenido. Madame Merle escuchó con interés el relato que le hizo Isabel de esta conversación, pero no había tenido necesidad de oírlo para librarse de la angustia que le producía. En general, la condesa no le infundía miedo, y podía permitirse hacer lo que en suma era lo mejor: no mostrarse temerosa.

Isabel recibió asimismo la visita de otra persona, a la que no resultaba fácil tratar con condescendencia, ni siquiera a su espalda. Se trataba de Henrietta Stackpole, que había abandonado París tras la partida de la señora Touchett a San Remo y, según relató, se había dirigido al sur y dedicado a explorar las ciudades italianas del norte, hasta llegar a Florencia a mediados de mayo. Madame Merle la examinó de una sola ojeada, la recorrió de pies a cabeza y, tras una punzada de desesperación, se propuso soportarla. Es más, decidió que iba a deleitarse con ella. No podía ser aspirada como una rosa, pero sí agarrada como una ortiga. Madame Merle se las arregló con gran ingenio para hundirla en la insignificancia, e Isabel sintió que, al haber previsto tal posibilidad, había hecho justicia a la inteligencia de su amiga. La visita de Henrietta se la había anunciado el señor Bantling, quien al llegar de Niza mientras Henrietta estaba en Venecia, y esperando encontrársela en Florencia, adonde ella todavía no había llegado, había acudido al palazzo Crescentini a comunicar su desilusión. La llegada de Henrietta tuvo lugar dos días más tarde, y produjo en el señor Bantling una emoción que estaba ampliamente justificada por el hecho de que no la había vuelto a ver desde aquellos episodios sucedidos en Versalles. La situación fue vista con humor por todos, pero solo habló abiertamente de ella Ralph Touchett, quien en la intimidad de sus aposentos, mientras el señor Banling se fumaba un cigarro, dio rienda suelta a Dios sabe qué comentarios jocosos sobre la incisiva señorita Stackpole y su aliado británico. Dicho caballero se tomó la broma con perfecta ecuanimidad, y sin tapujo alguno confesó que él consideraba el asunto un cortejo intelectual. La señorita Stackpole le gustaba inmensamente; pensaba que tenía una magnífica cabeza sobre los hombros y encontraba muy reconfortante la compañía de una mujer que no se dedicaba a estar siempre pensando en el qué dirán ni en las apariencias. A la señorita Stackpole jamás le preocupaban las apariencias, y si a ella le traían sin cuidado, ¿a santo de qué iba a preocuparse él? Pero su curiosidad se había despertado; lo que de verdad quería saber es si en algún momento le preocuparían. Estaba dispuesto a llegar tan lejos como ella llegase…, y no veía razón para ser el primero en frenar.

Henrietta no daba muestra alguna de querer frenar. Sus perspectivas habían mejorado tras su partida de Inglaterra, y ahora disfrutaba plenamente de sus copiosos recursos. Es cierto que se había visto obligada a sacrificar sus esperanzas de acceder a la vida privada; la cuestión social en el continente estaba salpicada de obstáculos incluso más numerosos que los que se había encontrado en Inglaterra. Pero en el continente había una vida exterior, que era palpable y visible a cada instante, a la que se podía dar un uso literario con más facilidad que a las costumbres de los opacos isleños. Como la señorita Stackpole comentaba con mucho ingenio, al aire libre, en tierras extranjeras, uno tenía la impresión de estar viendo la parte frontal del tapiz; al aire libre, en Inglaterra, la impresión que se tenía era la de contemplarlo por detrás, con lo cual no se percibía el dibujo. Resultaba mortificante verse obligada a confesarlo, pero Henrietta, harta de ocultismos, centraba ahora toda su atención en la vida de la calle. Había estado dos meses en Venecia estudiándola, y desde dicha ciudad había enviado al *Interviewer* descripciones minuciosas de las góndolas, de la Piazza, del puente de los Suspiros, de las palomas y del joven gondolero que cantaba los versos de Taso. Su propósito actual era dirigirse a Roma antes de que llegase la malaria (parecía suponer que esta lo hacía en fecha fija); y, de acuerdo con su plan, tan solo pasaría unos días en Florencia. El señor Bantling iba a acompañarla a Roma, y

Henrietta le comentó a Isabel que, dado que él había estado antes allí, era hombre de la milicia y había recibido una educación clásica (había estudiado en Eton, donde, aseguraba la señorita Stackpole, no se estudiaba más que latín y a Whyte-Melville), iba a ser un acompañante ciertamente útil en la ciudad de los césares. Aprovechando la coyuntura, a Ralph se le ocurrió la feliz idea de proponerle a Isabel que también ella, con su primo de acompañante, fuese de peregrinaje a Roma. Sabía que la joven planeaba pasar en la ciudad parte del próximo invierno, y eso estaba muy bien, pero entretanto no le vendría mal explorar el territorio. Restaban diez días del hermoso mes de mayo, que era el más apreciado por los auténticos enamorados de Roma, e Isabel, se aventuraba a pronosticar, acabaría por convertirse en una de ellos. Contaría además con la compañía de una persona de confianza de su propio sexo, cuya presencia, gracias al hecho de que otros reclamaban asimismo su atención, no tenía por qué resultar opresiva. Madame Merle se quedaría con la señora Touchett: había dejado Roma para pasar fuera el verano y no le iba a apetecer regresar. La dama en cuestión se confesó encantada de quedarse tranquila en Florencia. Había cerrado su apartamento y enviado a la cocinera a su Palestrina natal; con todo, animó a Isabel a aceptar la propuesta de Ralph y le aseguró que no se podía despreciar una introducción a Roma como aquella. Isabel, para ser sinceros, no necesitó hacerse de rogar, y los cuatro emprendieron los preparativos para el corto viaje. En esta ocasión, la señora Touchett aceptó con resignación la ausencia de su dama de compañía; como ya hemos visto, ahora se inclinaba por la idea de que su sobrina debía arreglárselas por sí misma.

Antes de iniciar el viaje, Isabel vio a Gilbert Osmond y le mencionó el plan.

—Me gustaría mucho estar en Roma con usted —dijo el caballero—. Me encantaría verla allí.

—Pues, entonces, venga —dijo la joven tras un instante de titubeo.

—Pero va a estar acompañada de mucha gente.

—Sí —reconoció Isabel—, está claro que no voy a estar sola.

Por un momento, Osmond se quedó callado.

—Le gustará —prosiguió al fin—. La han echado a perder, pero sin duda quedará fascinada.

—¿Es que no tendría que gustarme porque a la pobre, esa Niobe de las naciones, la hayan echado a perder? —preguntó ella.

—No, creo que no. La han maltratado tan a menudo… —Sonrió—. Pero si yo fuese, ¿qué iba a hacer con mi hijita?

—¿No puede dejarla en la villa?

—No sé si eso me gustaría… aunque hay una mujer mayor muy buena que se encarga de cuidarla. No puedo permitirme una institutriz.

—Pues en ese caso, tráigala con usted —dijo Isabel con una sonrisa.

El señor Osmond adoptó un gesto serio.

—Ha estado en Roma todo el invierno, en el convento; y es demasiado joven para hacer viajes de placer.

—¿Es que no le agrada la idea de que vea mundo? —sugirió Isabel.

—No, yo creo que a las jovencitas hay que mantenerlas alejadas de él.

—Pues a mí me educaron de forma diferente.

—¿A usted? Ya, pero en su caso funcionó porque usted… usted era excepcional.

—No veo yo por qué —dijo Isabel, quien, sin embargo, no estaba segura de que no hubiese algo de verdad en aquellas palabras.

El señor Osmond no las explicó, se limitó a añadir:

—Si creyese que por unirse a un grupo social en Roma mi hija iba a parecerse a usted, me la llevaría allí mañana mismo.

—No haga que se parezca a mí —dijo Isabel—. Déjela tal como es.

—Podría enviarla con mi hermana —sugirió Osmond.

Parecía casi estar pidiéndole consejo; daba la impresión de que le agradase comentar sus asuntos domésticos con Isabel.

—Sí —dijo la joven—. No creo que eso contribuyese mucho a hacer que se pareciese a mí.

Cuando la joven ya había partido hacia Roma, Gilbert Osmond se reunió con madame Merle en casa de la condesa Gemini. Había otras personas presentes; el salón de la condesa solía estar concurrido, y la conversación había sido de tono general; pero al cabo de un rato, Osmond abandonó su sitio y fue a sentarse en un otamán, donde quedó medio de espaldas, medio de lado, junto a la butaca de madame Merle.

—Quiere que vaya a Roma con ella —anunció en voz baja.

—¿Que vayas con ella?

—Que esté allí mientras está ella. Fue ella la que lo propuso.

—Supongo que querrás decir que la propuesta fue tuya y que ella la aceptó.

—Por supuesto que yo le di pie. Pero se muestra alentadora… muy alentadora.

—Me alegra oírlo, pero no cantes victoria demasiado pronto. Por supuesto que irás a Roma.

—Ah —dijo Osmond—, ¡cuánto trabajo está dando esa idea tuya!

—No finjas que no estás disfrutando: eres muy desagradecido. Hacía muchos años que no estabas tan bien ocupado.

—Me encanta cómo te lo tomas —dijo Osmond—. Eso sí que debería agradecerlo.

—Sí, pero no demasiado —respondió madame Merle. Hablaba sin perder su habitual sonrisa, reclinada en la butaca y sin dejar de mirar a su alrededor—. Has causado muy buena impresión, y he comprobado con mis propios ojos que la que has recibido también ha sido buena. Si has ido de visita en siete ocasiones a casa de la señora Touchett, no ha sido precisamente por mí.

—La joven no es desagradable —comentó en voz baja Osmond.

Madame Merle posó la mirada en él un instante, y al hacerlo sus labios se cerraron con cierta firmeza.

—¿Es eso todo cuanto tienes que decir de esa criatura maravillosa?

—¿Todo? ¿Es que no es suficiente? ¿De cuántas personas me has oído decir más?

Madame Merle no respondió, pero siguió ofreciendo su sonrisa habitual a toda la estancia.

—Eres increíble —murmuró al fin—. Me asusta el abismo al que la he precipitado.

Osmond soltó una carcajada.

—Ya no te puedes echar atrás… has ido demasiado lejos.

—Está bien; pero el resto corre de tu cuenta.

—Así será —dijo Osmond.

Madame Merle se quedó callada, y Osmond cambió de nuevo de sitio; pero cuando ella se levantó para irse, el caballero hizo lo propio. El coche de la señora Touchett la esperaba en el patio, y tras ayudarla a entrar en él, Osmond se quedó allí demorando su partida.

—Has sido muy indiscreto —dijo la dama con cierto aire cansino—. No tendrías que haberte movido cuando lo hice yo.

Él se había despojado del sombrero y se pasó la mano por la frente.

—Siempre me olvido, he perdido la costumbre.

—Eres absolutamente increíble —repitió la dama, alzando la vista hacia las ventanas de la casa, una estructura moderna en la parte nueva de la ciudad.

Osmond hizo caso omiso del comentario, pero se dirigió a madame Merle con toda sinceridad.

—Es verdaderamente encantadora; no creo haber conocido a nadie que tenga más gracia.

—Me alegra oírte decir eso. Cuanto más te agrade, mejor para mí.

—Me gusta muchísimo. Es tal como me dijiste, y además, creo yo, capaz de sentir gran afecto. Solo le encuentro un defecto.

—¿Cuál?

—Que tiene demasiadas ideas.

—Ya te advertí que era inteligente.

—Por fortuna, son todas muy malas —dijo Osmond.

—¿Por qué por fortuna?

—¡Porque habrán de ser sacrificadas!

Madame Merle se reclinó en el asiento y miró al frente; después se dirigió al cochero, pero una vez más, Osmond la retuvo.

—Si voy a Roma, ¿qué haré con Pansy?

—Ya iré yo a verla —dijo madame Merle.

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No intentaré relatar las impresiones que Isabel tuvo de Roma, ni analizar sus sentimientos mientras recorría las antiguas calzadas del Foro, ni tampoco enumerar sus pulsaciones al atravesar el umbral de San Pedro. Baste con decir que la percepción que obtuvo del infinito interés de dicho lugar era la que se podía esperar en una joven de su inteligencia y cultura. Siempre había sentido inclinación por la historia, y allí había historia en los adoquines de la calle y en los átomos de la luz del sol. La imaginación de Isabel se avivaba ante la mención de grandes hazañas, y allí donde fuera siempre se había realizado alguna gran hazaña. Todas esas cosas le provocaban gran emoción, pero era una emoción callada. Sus acompañantes tenían la impresión de que hablaba menos de lo habitual, y Ralph Touchett, cuando aparentaba mirar con aire lánguido y torpe por encima de la cabeza de su prima, lo que en realidad hacía era observarla. Por su parte, la joven se sentía inmensamente feliz; incluso habría estado dispuesta a creer que aquellas eran en general las horas más felices de su vida. La sensación de un pasado humano poderoso le resultaba abrumadora, pero se veía entremezclada de la forma más extraña, repentina y caprichosa con la brisa fresca y reconfortante del futuro. Las sensaciones se fundían unas con otras de tal forma que apenas distinguía cuál de ellas la guiaba, y deambulaba sumida en una especie de éxtasis de contemplación contenido, y aunque con frecuencia veía en las cosas que contemplaba más de lo que allí había, dejaba de ver muchas de las piezas que la guía Murray enumeraba. Roma, como decía Ralph, se entregaba plenamente al momento psicológico. El tropel de turistas estrepitosos había abandonado la ciudad, y la mayor parte de los lugares solemnes había recobrado su solemnidad. El cielo era un resplandor azulado, y el agua de las fuentes, en sus hornacinas musgosas, había perdido su helor y redoblado su música. En las esquinas de las calles luminosas y cálidas uno tenía que andar entre una profusión de flores. Una tarde, la tercera de su estancia en la ciudad, nuestros amigos habían ido a visitar las excavaciones más recientes del Foro, cuyos trabajos se habían ampliado mucho desde hacía algún tiempo. Habían bajado desde la calle moderna hasta el nivel de la Vía Sacra, que recorrían con paso reverente aunque distinto en cada caso. A Henrietta Stackpole la sorprendía el hecho de que la antigua Roma estuviese pavimentada de forma muy parecida a Nueva York, e incluso encontró una analogía entre los profundos surcos de las cuadrigas que se podían distinguir en la antigua calzada y los raíles de hierro entrecruzados que denotan la intensidad de la vida en Estados Unidos. El sol había iniciado el descenso, el aire era una bruma dorada, y las largas sombras de las columnas rotas y los difusos pedestales se proyectaban sobre el campo de ruinas. Henrietta se alejó en compañía del señor Bantling, aparentemente encantada de oírle hablar de Julio César como «ese viejo pícaro», y Ralph dirigió todas las aclaraciones que estaba preparado para ofrecer al oído atento de nuestra heroína. Uno de los modestos arqueólogos que pululan por el lugar se había puesto a disposición de los dos jóvenes, y recitaba su lección con una fluidez que no se había visto en absoluto mermada pese a lo avanzado de la temporada. En un rincón remoto del Foro se estaba realizando una excavación y el arqueólogo les dijo que si a los signori les apetecía ir hasta allí un momento a mirar, quizá viesen algo de interés. La propuesta sedujo más a Ralph que a Isabel, fatigada ya de tanto andar. De manera que encareció a su primo que fuese a satisfacer su curiosidad mientras ella esperaba su vuelta tranquilamente. El momento y el lugar eran plenamente de su agrado, de modo que le resultaría placentero quedarse un rato a solas. Así pues, Ralph se alejó en compañía del cicerone mientras Isabel tomaba asiento en una columna caída cerca de la base del Capitolio. Quería tener un momento de soledad, pero apenas pudo disfrutar del mismo. Pese al profundo interés que despertaban en ella aquellas maltrechas reliquias del pasado de Roma que yacían diseminadas a su alrededor y en las que la corrosión de los siglos no había conseguido eliminar las huellas de la vida individual, sus pensamientos, tras detenerse un tiempo en aquellas cosas, habían empezado a divagar, mediante una concatenación de estadios que requeriría mucha perspicacia reconstruir, hasta regiones y objetos revestidos de un atractivo más vivo. Del pasado romano al futuro de Isabel Archer había un largo trecho, pero su imaginación lo había salvado de un solo vuelo y ahora revoloteaba en despaciosos círculos sobre este nuevo campo más cercano y fecundo. Estaba tan absorta en sus pensamientos, la vista fija en una hilera de losas agrietadas aunque todavía en su sitio, que no había oído el ruido de unos pasos que se aproximaban antes de que una sombra se cruzase en su campo de visión. Alzó la vista y vio a un caballero, un caballero que no era Ralph viniendo a decirle que había regresado de las excavaciones porque eran un

aburrimiento. El personaje se sobresaltó tanto como ella, y se descubrió la cabeza ante la visible sorpresa de Isabel, que empalideció.

—¡Lord Warburton! —exclamó, poniéndose en pie.

—No tenía ni idea de que fuese usted. Al doblar esa esquina me la he encontrado.

La joven miró a su alrededor para explicarse.

—Estoy sola en este momento, pero mis acompañantes acaban de dejarme. Mi primo se ha ido a ver los trabajos de excavación que hay por allí.

—Ah, sí; ya veo. —Y lord Warburton dirigió la mirada vagamente en la dirección que ella le había indicado. Ahora estaba plantado con firmeza ante ella; había recobrado el aplomo y parecía querer demostrarlo, si bien con toda gentileza—. No quiero molestarla —añadió, mirando el pilar abandonado—. Se la ve cansada.

—Sí, me siento un tanto fatigada. —Tras un breve titubeo, Isabel tomó de nuevo asiento—. Pero no quiero que interrumpa su paseo por mi causa —añadió.

—No importa, estoy completamente solo, no tengo absolutamente nada que hacer. No tenía la menor idea de que estuviese usted en Roma. Acabo de llegar de Oriente y solo estoy de paso.

—Ha hecho usted un largo viaje —dijo Isabel, que había sabido por Ralph que lord Warburton se había ausentado de Inglaterra.

—Sí, me marché al extranjero seis meses, poco después de verla por última vez. He estado en Turquía y en Asia Menor; llegué de Atenas hace unos días. —Aunque hacía lo posible por no mostrarse azorado, no parecía muy cómodo, y tras dirigir una larga mirada a la joven le preguntó sin rodeos—: ¿Quiere que la deje sola, o me permite que le haga compañía un rato?

Isabel respondió con amabilidad.

—No quiero que me deje, lord Warburton. Me alegro mucho de verle.

—Le agradezco sus palabras. ¿Me permite que me siente?

En el fuste estriado donde Isabel se había sentado podrían haberse acomodado varias personas, y había sitio de sobra incluso para un fornido caballero inglés. Aquel distinguido espécimen de las clases privilegiadas tomó asiento cerca de nuestra joven dama, y al cabo de cinco minutos ya le había hecho varias preguntas, escogidas un tanto al azar, cuyas respuestas al parecer no captó, ya que formuló alguna de ellas dos veces. A su vez, le proporcionó bastante información sobre sí mismo, que ella, haciendo gala de la mayor tranquilidad propia del carácter femenino, no echó en saco roto. En reiteradas ocasiones afirmó que no había esperado encontrársela, y resultó evidente que el encuentro le afectaba de tal forma que habría sido recomendable cierta preparación. Sin apenas transición, la superficialidad con la que hablaba de las cosas se trocó en solemnidad, y de enumerar sus tribulaciones pasó a relatar sus placeres. Lucía un espléndido bronceado; incluso su indómita barba aparecía bruñida por el ardiente sol de Asia. Se cubría con esas prendas holgadas y heterogéneas que elige el viajero inglés en tierras extranjeras para sentirse cómodo y afirmar su nacionalidad; y con aquellos ojos serenos y agradables, aquella tez bronceada, fresca aunque madura, aquella figura varonil, aquellos modales pausados y aquel aire general de ser un caballero y un explorador, era un representante tan claro de la raza británica que quienes sienten aprecio por ella no habrían podido evitar reconocerle en cualquier confín de la tierra. Isabel reparó en tales cosas y se congratuló de que él siempre le hubiese agradado. Había conservado, de forma inequívoca y a pesar de los contratiempos, todas sus cualidades, cualidades que expresaban, por así decirlo, la esencia de las grandes casas nobles; que recordaban las características y ornamentos más íntimos de aquellas, esos que no se cambian de sitio por capricho y que solo desaparecen en caso de desgracia mayor. Hablaron de los asuntos que era natural que tratasen: de la muerte del tío de Isabel, del estado de salud de Ralph, de cómo había pasado ella el invierno, de su visita a Roma, de su vuelta a Florencia, de los planes que tenía para el verano, del hotel en el que se alojaba; y, a continuación, de las aventuras de lord Warburton, de sus movimientos, intenciones, impresiones, y de su domicilio en aquel momento. Por fin se hizo un silencio que fue mucho más elocuente que cualquier cosa que se habían dicho y que casi convirtió en superfluas las últimas palabras de lord Warburton:

—Le he escrito varias veces.

—¿Que me ha escrito? Jamás he recibido carta suya.

—Nunca se las envié. Las quemé.

—¡Ah! —dijo Isabel entre risas—. Mejor que haya sido usted quien lo hiciera y no yo.

—Pensé que no le interesarían —añadió él, con una sencillez que la conmovió—. Me pareció que, después de todo,

no tenía derecho alguno a molestarla con mis cartas.

—Me habría alegrado mucho recibir noticias suyas. Bien sabe usted cuánto esperaba que… que… —Isabel se interrumpió; sus pensamientos expresados en voz alta habrían parecido pueriles.

—Sé lo que va a decirme. Que esperaba que continuásemos siendo buenos amigos.

La fórmula, en labios de lord Warburton, sonaba en verdad pueril; pero también era cierto que a él le interesaba que así fuese.

—No hable de eso, se lo ruego —fue lo único que Isabel acertó a decir, unas palabras que tampoco le parecieron más sustanciosas que las de él.

—Sería un pequeño consuelo que me permitiese hablar —dijo su interlocutor con tono enérgico.

—No puedo fingir para consolarle —dijo la joven, que, pese a seguir sentada inmóvil, sintió un triunfo íntimo al lanzarle de nuevo la respuesta que tan poco había satisfecho a su acompañante seis meses antes. Lord Warburton era agradable, fuerte, galante; no había hombre mejor que él. Pero su respuesta seguía siendo la misma.

—Es mucho mejor que no trate de consolarme; le resultaría imposible —le oyó decir a través de la bruma de aquella extraña euforia que la embargaba.

—Tenía la esperanza de que volviésemos a encontrarnos, ya que no temía que me hiciese sentir culpable por haberlo tratado mal. Pero cuando habla usted así… me causa más dolor que placer.

Isabel se levantó con aire un tanto estudiado y majestuoso, y buscó con la mirada a sus compañeros.

—No quiero hacerla sentir así; está claro que no puedo decirlo. Lo único que deseo es que sepa un par de cosas, para hacerme, en cierto modo, justicia a mí mismo. No volveré a aludir de nuevo a la cuestión. Todo lo que le dije el año pasado lo sentía de verdad; era incapaz de pensar en otra cosa. He tratado de olvidar, con todas mis fuerzas y de forma sistemática. He tratado de interesarme por alguien más. Le estoy diciendo esto porque quiero que sepa que he cumplido mi parte. Pero ha sido en vano. Me marché al extranjero por la misma razón, lo más lejos posible. Según dicen, viajar distrae la mente, pero en mi caso no fue así. He pensado constantemente en usted desde la última vez que la vi. Sigo exactamente igual. La amo tanto como entonces, y todo lo que le dije sigue siendo verdad. En este preciso instante, mientras le hablo, me doy cuenta de nuevo, con toda claridad y para mi inmensa desgracia, del hechizo que usted ejerce sobre mí. Ya está, no podía por menos de decírselo. Sin embargo, no es mi intención insistir; ha sido solo un momento. Solo añadiré que cuando hace apenas un rato me tropecé con usted, sin la más remota idea de que iba a verla, estaba precisamente, se lo juro por mi honor, preguntándome dónde estaría usted.

Había recuperado el dominio de sí mismo, que, a medida que hablaba, se fue afianzando. Podría haber estado dirigiéndose a un pequeño comité, pronunciando con claridad y aplomo absolutos una declaración de importancia, auxiliado de vez en cuando por una rápida ojeada a unas anotaciones escritas en un papel escondido en el sombrero, que no había vuelto a ponerse. Y a buen seguro que el comité habría quedado convencido con sus explicaciones.

—He pensado a menudo en usted, lord Warburton —respondió Isabel—. Puede estar seguro de que siempre lo voy a hacer. —Y, en un tono en el que trató de subrayar la gentileza y suavizar el significado, añadió—: Eso no nos perjudicará a ninguno de los dos.

Echaron a andar juntos, e Isabel se interesó al punto por sus hermanas y le rogó que les dijera que así lo había hecho. Por el momento, él no volvió a hacer referencia a la gran cuestión, sino que de nuevo se internó en terreno más firme y seguro. Pero quiso saber cuándo pensaba irse de Roma, y al comunicarle ella la fecha de su partida, declaró que se alegraba de que fuera algo tan lejano todavía.

—¿Por qué dice eso si usted tan solo está de paso? —preguntó Isabel con cierta ansiedad.

—Bueno, cuando hablé de estar de paso, no quería decir que uno pueda pasar por Roma como si lo hiciese por Clapham Junction. Estar aquí de paso implica quedarse una o dos semanas.

—Sea franco y diga que tiene la intención de quedarse el mismo tiempo que yo.

Sonrió avergonzado y, por un momento, dio la impresión de estar tanteándola.

—Es que si lo digo, no le va a gustar. Le entrará miedo de verme demasiado.

—Que me guste o no, carece de importancia. Está claro que no puedo esperar que abandone por mi causa este lugar maravilloso. Pero confieso que me da miedo.

—¿Miedo a que empiece de nuevo? Le prometo que tendré mucho cuidado.

Poco a poco habían ido aminorando el paso y, por un momento, se quedaron frente a frente.

—¡Pobre lord Warburton! —dijo Isabel con una compasión que pretendía ser beneficiosa para ambos.

—¡Sí, pobre lord Warburton! Pero tendré cuidado.

—Usted puede sentirse desgraciado, pero no va a conseguir que yo lo sea. No lo permitiré.

—Si creyera que podría hacerla desgraciada, creo que lo intentaría.

Al oír esas palabras, Isabel echó a andar y lord Warburton procedió a seguirla.

—Jamás diré nada que pueda molestarla.

—Muy bien. Porque si lo hace, se acabará nuestra amistad.

—Quizá algún día, pasado algún tiempo, me dé usted su permiso.

—¿Permiso para hacerme desgraciada?

Él titubeó.

—Para decirle de nuevo… —empezó, pero se detuvo a tiempo—. Me lo guardaré para mí. Me lo guardaré siempre para mí.

La señorita Stackpole y su acompañante se habían sumado a la visita de Ralph a las excavaciones, y los tres emergieron en aquel momento de entre los montículos de tierra y piedras que rodeaban la abertura y quedaron a la vista de Isabel y lord Warburton. El pobre Ralph saludó a su amigo con alegría no exenta de asombro, y Henrietta exclamó con voz estentórea:

—¡Dios mío, pero si está aquí ese lord!

Ralph y su vecino inglés se saludaron con esa austeridad con la que, tras una larga separación, se saludan los vecinos ingleses, y la señorita Stackpole posó su inquisitiva mirada intelectual en el bronceado viajero. Pero pronto decidió cuál era su postura ante la crisis.

—Imagino que no se acordará de mí, señor.

—Por supuesto que me acuerdo de usted —dijo lord Warburton—. La invité a venir a verme, y usted jamás lo hizo.

—Yo no voy a todos los sitios a los que me invitan —respondió con frialdad la señorita Stackpole.

—Ah, bien; en tal caso, no la invitaré más —dijo entre risas el amo de Lockleigh.

—Si lo hace, iré; no le quepa duda.

A lord Warburton, pese a su hilaridad, no parecía caberle la menor duda. El señor Bantling se había quedado a un lado con discreción, pero aprovechó aquel momento para saludar con una inclinación de cabeza al noble.

—Ah, ¿está usted por aquí, Bantling? —dijo lord Warburton estrechándole la mano.

—Vaya —dijo Henrietta—, no sabía que lo conociera usted.

—Imagino que no sabe a cuánta gente conozco —repuso el señor Bantling con humor.

—Creía que, cuando un inglés conocía a un lord, era algo que siempre contaba.

—Ya, es que me temo que Bantling se avergüenza de mí —dijo lord Warburton riendo de nuevo.

A Isabel le agradó aquel tono y exhaló un leve suspiro de alivio mientras emprendían el camino de vuelta a casa.

Al día siguiente era domingo, y la joven empleó la mañana en escribir dos largas cartas: una a su hermana Lily y otra a madame Merle, pero en ninguna de aquellas epístolas mencionó el hecho de que un pretendiente rechazado hubiese amenazado con declarársele de nuevo. Los domingos por la tarde, todos los romanos de pro (y con frecuencia los bárbaros del norte son los mejores) tienen por costumbre asistir al rezo de vísperas en San Pedro; y nuestros amigos habían acordado ir juntos en coche a la gran basílica. Después del almuerzo, una hora antes de que llegase el carruaje, lord Warburton se presentó en el Hôtel de Paris e hizo una visita a las dos damas, ya que Ralph Touchett y el señor Bantling habían salido juntos. El visitante parecía querer darle a Isabel una prueba de su intención de mantener la promesa que le había hecho el día anterior; se mostró discreto y franco a la vez, y no fue ni de lejos inoportuno o torpe, y menos insistente. Quería así que fuese ella la que juzgase que podía ser un buen amigo sin más. Habló de sus viajes, de Persia, de Turquía, y cuando la señorita Stackpole le preguntó si le merecería la pena visitar dichos países, él le aseguró que ofrecían un sinfín de oportunidades para una mujer emprendedora. Isabel le hizo justicia, pero se preguntó cuáles eran sus intenciones e incluso qué esperaba alcanzar con aquella demostración de sinceridad tan absoluta. Si lo que esperaba era ablandarla al mostrarle que era un magnífico compañero, podría haberse ahorrado la molestia. Bien sabía que todo en él era de una calidad superlativa, y nada de lo que ahora hiciese era necesario para mejorar tal opinión. Es más, el simple hecho de que se encontrase en Roma le resultaba una complicación desagradable, y ella con las que disfrutaba era con las agradables. Pese a todo, cuando al término de la visita lord Warburton anunció que él también acudiría a San Pedro y que los buscaría a ella y a sus amigos, Isabel se vio obligada a responderle que hiciera como gustase.

Ya en la iglesia, mientras recorría aquella inmensidad de mosaicos, fue lord Warburton la primera persona con la que se encontró. Ella no se había contado entre esos turistas de casta superior que se sienten «decepcionados» al ver

San Pedro y que encuentran que la basílica no se corresponde con su fama. La primera vez que pasó bajo los enormes cortinajes de cuero que se tensan y golpetean la entrada, la primera vez que se encontró bajo la enorme cúpula arqueada y vio cómo la luz se filtraba a través del aire denso de incienso, entre reflejos de mármol y oro, de mosaicos y bronce, su concepto de grandeza aumentó hasta límites vertiginosos, y desde entonces jamás careció de espacio para expandirse. Lo contempló todo con admiración, como lo hace un niño o un campesino, y rindió silencioso tributo a lo sublime del lugar. Lord Warburton iba a su lado y le hablaba de Santa Sofía de Constantinopla, y por un instante Isabel temió que acabase haciéndole reconocer lo ejemplar de su conducta. El servicio religioso aún no había comenzado, pero en San Pedro hay mucho que observar, y, como hay algo que resulta casi profano en la inmensidad del lugar, que lo hace parecer destinado en igual medida al ejercicio físico que al espiritual, las distintas figuras y grupos, los fieles y espectadores entremezclados, pueden cumplir sus variados propósitos sin conflicto ni escándalo. En aquella inmensidad esplendorosa las indiscreciones individuales no se aprecian más que a corta distancia. A Isabel y sus acompañantes, sin embargo, no podía reprochárseles ninguna; ya que, pese a que Henrietta declaró con toda ingenuidad que la cúpula de Miguel Ángel quedaba empequeñecida si se la comparaba con la del Capitolio de Washington, su queja iba destinada principalmente a los oídos del señor Bantling y se reservaba una versión más detallada para las columnas del *Interviewer*. Isabel hizo el recorrido de la iglesia en compañía de lord Warburton y, al aproximarse al coro que queda a la izquierda de la entrada, les llegaron las voces de los cantores del Papa por encima de las cabezas del gran número de personas congregadas al otro lado de las puertas. Se detuvieron un momento en los márgenes de aquella multitud, formada a partes iguales de romanos autóctonos y extranjeros curiosos, y el concierto sacro continuó mientras estaban allí. Al parecer, Ralph se hallaba, junto con Henrietta y el señor Bantling, en el interior, donde Isabel, al mirar más allá del denso grupo, vio cómo la luz vespertina, entre nubes plateadas de incienso que parecían entremezclarse con los espléndidos cánticos, caía oblicuamente desde los altos ventanales hundidos entre relieves. Al cabo de un tiempo cesaron los cánticos y entonces lord Warburton pareció dispuesto a alejarse de allí con ella. Isabel no tuvo más opción que acompañarlo; y en ese momento se encontró frente a frente con Gilbert Osmond, que al parecer había estado detrás de ella, a corta distancia, y ahora se acercaba mostrando sus mejores modales, que en esta ocasión parecía hacer aún más patentes para adecuarse al lugar.

—Así que se ha decidido a venir —dijo la joven al tiempo que le tendía la mano.

—Sí, llegué anoche y me he acercado a su hotel esta tarde. Allí me han dicho que se encontraba usted aquí y he estado buscándola.

—Los demás están ahí dentro —se decidió a decir Isabel.

—Yo no he venido buscando a los demás —replicó él al instante.

Isabel apartó la mirada; lord Warburton estaba observándolos, y tal vez hubiese oído aquello. De improviso recordó que era exactamente lo mismo que le había dicho la mañana que fue a Gardencourt a pedirle que se casase con él. Las palabras del señor Osmond habían hecho que el rubor cubriese sus mejillas, y aquel recuerdo no ayudó a que se disipase. Para evitar traicionarse a sí misma, procedió a hacer las presentaciones y, afortunadamente, en ese momento emergió del coro el señor Bantling, que se abrió paso entre la multitud con valerosa determinación británica, seguido de la señorita Stackpole y Ralph Touchett. Y digo afortunadamente, aunque tal vez sea esta una versión superficial de las cosas, ya que, al percatarse de la presencia del caballero de Florencia, Ralph Touchett no pareció encontrar en ello motivo alguno de alegría. No obstante, se acercó con cortesía y le comentó a Isabel, con la debida benevolencia, que pronto tendría a todos sus amigos a su alrededor. La señorita Stackpole había conocido al señor Osmond en Florencia, pero ya había encontrado ocasión para decirle a Isabel que no le gustaba más que sus otros admiradores, refiriéndose al señor Touchett y a lord Warburton, e incluso a aquel menudo señor Rosier de París. «No sé qué es lo que tienes —se había complacido en observar—, pero para ser una joven tan agradable atraes a la gente más extraña. El señor Goodwood es el único que merece mi respeto, y es justo el que tú no valoras.»

—¿Qué opinión le merece San Pedro? —estaba en aquel momento preguntándole el señor Osmond a nuestra joven dama.

—Es muy grande y muy luminoso —se limitó a responder ella.

—Es demasiado grande; hace que uno se sienta como un átomo.

—¿Y no es así como debe sentirse uno en el templo más grande erigido por los humanos? —preguntó ella a su vez, bastante satisfecha de la frase.

—Imagino que es como hay que sentirse en cualquier parte, cuando uno no es nadie. Pero en una iglesia me gusta tan poco como en cualquier otro lugar.

—¡Tendría que haber sido usted Papa! —exclamó Isabel, recordando algo que él le había dicho en Florencia.
—¡Ah, lo que habría disfrutado! —dijo Gilbert Osmond.
Lord Warburton, mientras tanto, se había unido a Ralph Touchett, y ambos se alejaron juntos.
—¿Quién es ese individuo que está hablando con la señorita Archer? —quiso saber el noble.
—Se llama Gilbert Osmond y vive en Florencia —dijo Ralph.
—Y aparte de eso, ¿qué es?
—Nada en absoluto. Bueno, sí: es estadounidense, pero es algo que uno olvida fácilmente… tiene muy poco de ello.
—¿Hace mucho que conoce a la señorita Archer?
—Unas dos o tres semanas.
—¿Y a ella le gusta?
—Es lo que trata de averiguar.
—¿Y qué crees que va a pasar?
—¿Que si va a averiguarlo?
—Si le gustará.
—¿Me estás preguntando si lo aceptará?
—Sí —reconoció lord Warburton tras un instante—; para mi desgracia, supongo que es eso lo que quiero decir.
—Si nadie trata de impedirlo, puede que no lo acepte.
Su señoría se quedó un instante mirándolo fijamente, pero al final lo entendió.
—Entonces, ¿lo que tenemos que hacer es estar callados?
—Callados como tumbas. ¡Y a ver si así tenemos alguna posibilidad!
—¿Alguna posibilidad de que lo acepte?
—De que no lo haga.
Lord Warburton asimiló el comentario en silencio, pero a continuación habló de nuevo.
—¿Es muy inteligente?
—No lo sabes bien —dijo Ralph.
Su interlocutor se quedó pensativo.
—¿Y qué más?
—¿Qué más quieres? —gimió Ralph.
—Querrás decir qué más quiere ella.
Ralph lo tomó del brazo para hacerle dar la vuelta: tenían que reunirse con los demás.
—Ella no quiere nada de lo que nosotros podamos ofrecerle.
—Ah, bueno, si no quiere nada de ti… —dijo su señoría con gracejo mientras regresaban.

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Al día siguiente, ya entrada la tarde, lord Warburton acudió de nuevo al hotel a ver a sus amigos y, una vez allí, se enteró de que habían ido a la ópera. Se dirigió al teatro con la intención de visitarlos en el palco, como se acostumbra a hacer sin formalismos en Italia; y una vez que logró entrar (se trataba de un local de segunda categoría), inspeccionó aquella sala de gran tamaño, mal iluminada y de pobre decoración. Acababa de finalizar uno de los actos y no había obstáculo para su búsqueda. Tras escudriñar dos o tres filas de palcos, descubrió en uno de los más grandes a una dama a la que no tuvo dificultad en reconocer. La señorita Archer estaba sentada de cara al escenario y quedaba parcialmente oculta por la cortina del palco; y a su lado, recostado en su asiento, se encontraba el señor Gilbert Osmond. Parecían tener el lugar para ellos solos, y Warburton supuso que sus acompañantes habían aprovechado el descanso para disfrutar de la relativa frescura del vestíbulo. Permaneció un instante con la mirada clavada en la interesante pareja y se preguntó si debería subir e interrumpir su tranquilidad. Al fin le pareció que Isabel lo había visto, y esa circunstancia le hizo tomar una decisión. No debía mostrarse claramente esquivo. Tomó el camino de las alturas y en la escalera se tropezó con Ralph Touchett, que bajaba con lentitud, el sombrero ladeado como indicando hastío y las manos donde siempre solía llevarlas.

—Te he visto abajo hace un momento e iba a buscarte. Me siento solo y necesito compañía —dijo Ralph a modo de saludo.

—Pues tienes una muy buena y la has abandonado.

—¿Te refieres a mi prima? Tiene un visitante y no me quiere allí. Y la señorita Stackpole y el señor Bantling se han ido a un café a tomarse un helado; a la señorita Stackpole le encanta el helado. Y tampoco me pareció que ellos me quisiesen a su lado. La ópera es muy mala; las mujeres parecen lavanderas y cantan como pavos reales. Me encuentro muy deprimido.

—Entonces harás mejor regresando al hotel —dijo lord Warburton sin rodeos.

—¿Y abandonar a mi joven dama en este deprimente lugar? De eso ni hablar, tengo que cuidar de ella.

—No parece andar escasa de amigos.

—Ya, por eso precisamente tengo que vigilarla.

—Pues si a ti no te quiere a su lado, es probable que a mí tampoco.

—No, en tu caso es distinto. Ve al palco y quédate allí mientras yo doy una vuelta.

Lord Warburton se dirigió al palco, donde Isabel le recibió como si fuese un amigo tan honorable y antiguo que él se preguntó vagamente a qué extraño dominio temporal lo estaba anexionando. Intercambió saludos con el señor Osmond, a quien había sido presentado el día anterior y que, tras su entrada, se mantuvo en silencio y un tanto al margen, como si rechazase cualquier intervención en los asuntos que probablemente se estaban tratando. Al recién llegado le sorprendió ver que, en un ambiente operístico como aquel, la señorita Archer aparecía radiante, presa incluso de una leve exaltación. Sin embargo, como la mirada de la joven era siempre penetrante, sus gestos vivaces y su conversación muy animada, era posible que se equivocase al respecto. Su conversación con él, por otro lado, indicaba presencia de ánimo; expresaba una afabilidad tan deliberada e ingeniosa que no dejaba duda de que se encontraba en pleno dominio de sus facultades. El pobre lord Warburton tuvo momentos de perplejidad. Ella lo había desanimado, expresamente, en la medida en que podía hacerlo una mujer. ¿A qué venían entonces todas aquellas artes y agasajos, sobre todo con aquel tono de reparación… o de preparación? Su voz tenía timbres de dulzura, pero ¿por qué razón los utilizaba con él? Regresaron los demás compañeros de palco, y dio comienzo otro acto de aquella ópera trivial, deprimente y familiar. El palco era amplio y había sitio para que él se quedase si se sentaba un poco atrás y a oscuras. Y así lo hizo durante media hora, mientras el señor Osmond permanecía en su sitio, inclinado hacia delante y con los codos apoyados en las rodillas, justo detrás de Isabel. Lord Warburton no oía nada, y desde su oscuro rincón no veía otra cosa que el nítido perfil de aquella joven dama recortado contra la tenue iluminación de la sala. Al llegar el siguiente entreacto nadie se movió. El señor Osmond se puso a hablar con Isabel y lord Warburton permaneció en su rincón. Sin embargo, solo estuvo unos instantes; después, se levantó y dio las buenas noches a las damas. Isabel no hizo nada por retenerlo, pero ello no impidió que volviese a ser presa de la confusión. ¿Por qué

tenía ella tanto empeño en subrayar una de sus cualidades, justo la equivocada, y pasar completamente por alto otra, que era la acertada? Se sintió furioso consigo mismo por estar tan desconcertado, y después se enojó por sentirse furioso. La música de Verdi no le brindaba consuelo alguno, y salió del teatro y se fue caminando hacia su hotel, sin saber el camino, por aquellas tortuosas y trágicas callejuelas de Roma, por las que penas más grandes que la suya habían sido arrastradas bajo la luz de las estrellas.

Una vez que se hubo marchado, Osmond le preguntó a Isabel:

—¿Cómo es el carácter de ese caballero?

—Irreprochable… ¿acaso no lo ha visto?

—Es dueño de media Inglaterra; ese es su carácter —comentó Henrietta Stackpole—. ¡Y después dicen que es un país libre!

—¡Ah! ¿Es un gran terrateniente? ¡Dichoso él! —dijo Gilbert Osmond.

—¿Le parece a usted dichoso… ser propietario de unos infelices seres humanos? —preguntó Henrietta—. Él es amo de sus arrendatarios, y los cuenta por miles. Es agradable tener posesiones, pero yo me conformo con objetos inanimados. No me empeño en ser dueña de carne y huesos, de conciencias y mentes.

—Pues a mí me parece que es usted dueña de uno o dos seres humanos —señaló en tono burlón el señor Bantling —. Dudo mucho de que Warburton maneje a sus arrendatarios como usted me maneja a mí.

—Lord Warburton es un auténtico radical —apuntó Isabel—. Tiene ideas muy avanzadas.

—Lo que son muy avanzados son sus muros de piedra. Su parque está rodeado por una gigantesca verja de hierro, de unas treinta millas de extensión —anunció Henrietta para información del señor Osmond, y añadió—: Ya me gustaría a mí que tuviese una conversación con algunos de nuestros radicales de Boston.

—¿Es que están en contra de las verjas de hierro? —preguntó el señor Bantling.

—No cuando sirven para encerrar a malvados conservadores. Siempre tengo la impresión de hablar con usted sorteando algo rematado por finos y cortantes vidrios rotos.

—¿Conoce usted bien a ese reformador incorregible? —siguió preguntando Osmond a Isabel.

—Lo suficiente para lo que me interesa.

—¿Y en qué consiste ese interés?

—Pues en que me agrada que me guste.

—«Agradarle que le guste»… ¡menuda pasión!

—No —reflexionó Isabel—, entienda por gustarle a uno no tenerle aversión.

Osmond se echó a reír.

—¿Se propone, entonces, provocar en mí una pasión hacia él?

Ella no contestó de inmediato, pero poco después respondió a aquella frívola pregunta con una seriedad desproporcionada.

—No, señor Osmond —dijo—. No creo que yo me atreviera jamás a provocar nada en usted. —Luego, un poco más tranquila, añadió—: En cualquier caso, lord Warburton es un hombre muy agradable.

—¿De una gran inteligencia? —preguntó su amigo.

—De una enorme inteligencia, y tan bueno como aparenta.

—¿Tan bueno como bien parecido, quiere decir? Es muy bien parecido. ¡Qué detestable ser tan afortunado! Gran magnate inglés, además de inteligente y apuesto, y, por si esto fuera poco, merecedor de su más alta estima. Un hombre así, sí que despierta mi envidia.

Isabel lo examinó con interés.

—Me parece que usted siempre tiene a alguien a quien envidiar. Ayer era al Papa; hoy, al pobre lord Warburton.

—Mi envidia no es peligrosa; no le haría daño ni a una mosca. Yo no quiero destruir a ninguna persona, lo único que quiero es ser ella. Como ve, al único al que destruiría es a mí mismo.

—¿Es que le gustaría ser el Papa? —preguntó Isabel.

—Me encantaría, aunque tendría que haberme puesto a ello antes. Pero —preguntó Osmond volviendo al tema—, ¿por qué cuando habla usted de su amigo se refiere a él como pobre?

—Las mujeres, cuando son muy buenas, buenas de verdad, a veces se compadecen de los hombres a quienes han hecho daño; esa es la mejor forma que tienen de demostrar su bondad —dijo Ralph, tomando por primera vez parte en la conversación y con un cinismo tan transparente e ingenioso que resultaba prácticamente inocente.

—¿Es que acaso le he hecho yo daño a lord Warburton? —preguntó Isabel, enarcando las cejas como si tal idea

fuese totalmente novedosa.

—Pues si lo has hecho, le está bien empleado —dijo Henrietta al tiempo que se alzaba el telón para dar paso al ballet.

Isabel no volvió a ver a su supuesta víctima durante las veinticuatro horas siguientes, pero el segundo día después de la visita a la ópera se lo encontró en la galería del Capitolio, inmóvil ante la pieza más notable de la colección, la estatua del Gladiador moribundo. Isabel había llegado con sus acompañantes, entre quienes en esta ocasión se hallaba de nuevo Gilbert Osmond, y el grupo, tras haber subido por la escalinata, había entrado en la primera y más importante de las salas. Lord Warburton la saludó con aire animado, pero al momento le comunicó que se marchaba de la galería.

—Y me marcho también de Roma —añadió—, de manera que debo decirle adiós.

Por inconsecuente que pueda parecer, Isabel se sintió triste al oírlo. Tal vez se debía a que había cesado de tener miedo a que él reanudase su cortejo; pero pensaba en otras cosas. A punto estuvo de manifestarle su pesar, pero se contuvo y se limitó a desearle un feliz viaje, lo que hizo que él la mirase desconcertado.

—Me imagino que me considerará usted muy voluble, ya que el otro día le dije que tenía muchas ganas de quedarme un tiempo.

—Nada de eso, uno es libre de cambiar de idea.

—Eso es precisamente lo que he hecho.

—En tal caso, *bon voyage*.

—Tiene usted mucha prisa en deshacerse de mí —dijo su señoría un tanto quejoso.

—En absoluto. Pero detesto las despedidas.

—Le trae sin cuidado lo que yo haga —insistió él con tono lastimero.

Isabel lo miró un instante.

—Ah, está faltando a su promesa —dijo.

Lord Warburton se ruborizó como un muchacho quinceañero.

—Si falto a ella es porque me resulta imposible mantenerla; por eso me voy.

—Entonces, adiós.

—Adiós. —Pero lord Warburton seguía sin moverse—. ¿Cuándo podré verla de nuevo?

Isabel dudó un segundo, pero de inmediato, como si hubiera tenido una feliz inspiración, dijo:

—Algún día después de que se case.

—Eso nunca va a ocurrir. Será después de que lo haya hecho usted.

Ella sonrió.

—Para el caso es lo mismo.

—Sí, igual da. Adiós.

Se dieron la mano y él la dejó sola en aquella gloriosa sala, rodeada de todos aquellos relucientes mármoles antiguos. Isabel se sentó en el centro del círculo de aquellas presencias, contemplándolas distraídamente al tiempo que posaba la mirada en sus hermosos rostros carentes de expresión, y escuchaba, por así decirlo, su silencio eterno. Es de todo imposible, al menos en Roma, contemplar largo tiempo un gran número de esculturas griegas sin sentir el efecto de su quietud majestuosa; al igual que sucede cuando una enorme puerta se cierra para la ceremonia, cubre poco a poco el espíritu con un amplio manto de paz. Digo especialmente en Roma porque el aire romano constituye un medio exquisito para tales impresiones. La luz dorada del sol se mezcla con ellas, y la calma profunda del pasado, tan vívido, aunque no sea ya más que un vacío poblado de nombres, parece envolverlas con su solemne embrujo. Los postigos de las ventanas del Capitolio estaban entornados y sobre las figuras se proyectaba una sombra cálida y clara que las hacía ligeramente más humanas. Isabel permaneció sentada allí largo rato, cautivada por el encanto de su belleza inmóvil, preguntándose qué experiencias estarían contemplando aquellos ojos abiertos, y cómo sonarían a nuestros oídos aquellos labios extraños. Las paredes de color rojo oscuro de la sala daban relieve a las figuras; los pulidos mármoles del suelo reflejaban su belleza. Ya las había visto todas, pero se renovaba ahora en ella el placer, y era todavía más intenso porque de nuevo, por el momento, se alegraba de estar sola. Sin embargo, finalmente su atención decayó, arrastrada por una corriente de vida más profunda. De vez en cuando entraba algún turista que se detenía ante el Gladiador moribundo y, tras contemplarlo un instante, salía por la otra puerta, haciendo crujir bajo sus pasos el reluciente suelo. Al cabo de una media hora reapareció Gilbert Osmond, que al parecer se había adelantado al resto de sus compañeros. Avanzó hacia ella lentamente, con las manos a la espalda y su acostumbrada

sonrisa inquisitiva, aunque no del todo suplicante.

—Me sorprende verla sola —dijo—. Creí que tendría usted compañía.

—Y así es… la mejor —repuso ella mirando en dirección a las figuras del Fauno y de Antínoo.

—¿Las considera usted mejor compañía que un lord inglés?

—Ah, mi lord inglés me dejó hace ya un buen rato —dijo ella en tono deliberadamente seco, al tiempo que se levantaba.

No le pasó inadvertida aquella sequedad al señor Osmond, lo que para él añadía interés a la cuestión.

—Me temo que sea verdad lo que oí decir la otra tarde: se muestra usted un tanto cruel con ese aristócrata.

Isabel miró un instante hacia la estatua del vencido Gladiador.

—No es cierto —dijo—. Me muestro escrupulosamente amable.

—¡Precisamente a eso me refería! —replicó Gilbert Osmond con tal regocijo que es necesario explicar su humor.

Como ya sabemos, le gustaban los originales, las rarezas, todo lo que fuese superior y exquisito; y ahora que había visto a lord Warburton, a quien consideraba un destacado ejemplar de su raza y su casta, fue consciente de un atractivo añadido en la idea de adueñarse de una joven que había hecho méritos para figurar en su colección de objetos exquisitos al rechazar tan noble mano. Gilbert Osmond sentía un extraordinario aprecio por aquel patricio en particular; no ya por su distinción, que le parecía fácilmente superable, sino por su sólida posición. Nunca había perdonado a su hado que no le hubiese deparado un ducado inglés; por lo cual estaba en insuperables condiciones de calibrar cuán inesperada resultaba una conducta como la de Isabel. Resultaba muy apropiado que la mujer con quien se iba a casar hubiese hecho algo por el estilo.

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En el curso de la conversación con su excelente amigo, Ralph Touchett había matizado con cierta ironía, como bien sabemos, los méritos personales de Gilbert Osmond; pero, ante la conducta del caballero durante el resto de su visita a Roma, quizá sintiera que no había sido del todo justo. Osmond pasaba la mayor parte del día con Isabel y sus compañeros y acabó por convencerlos de que no había hombre de trato más agradable. ¿A quién se le podía escapar que en todo momento daba muestras, por así decirlo, de tacto y buen humor a la vez? Tal vez fuese exactamente esa la razón por la que Ralph lo había acusado en los viejos tiempos de superficialidad en el trato social. Pero hasta el reticente familiar de Isabel no tuvo más remedio que reconocer que ahora lo encontraba un compañero encantador. Su buen humor era inalterable, siempre mostraba un conocimiento exacto, utilizaba la palabra precisa, y todo ello con la solicitud del amigo que siempre tiene a punto una cerilla para encenderte el cigarrillo. Era evidente que Osmond estaba divirtiéndose, todo lo que puede divertirse un hombre al que apenas ya nada puede sorprender, lo cual lo movía casi al aplauso. No es que demostrase una alegría desatada, pues era de los que en el concierto del placer nunca habría rozado el tambor sino con los nudillos de la mano, ya que sentía odio mortal ante toda nota aguda o estridente, ante lo que él denominaba desvaríos injustificados. Pensaba que la señorita Archer se precipitaba a veces demasiado al mostrar su predisposición. Y era una lástima que tuviese tal defecto, porque, de no haberlo tenido, no habría tenido de hecho ninguno; se habría amoldado con tanta suavidad a su necesidad general de ella como se adapta con el uso un puño de marfil a la palma de la mano. Aunque personalmente no fuese excesivo en sus efusiones, sí era, en cambio, profundo, y durante aquellos últimos días del mayo romano sentía que la satisfacción lo embargaba cuando daba lentos y erráticos paseos bajo los pinos de la Villa Borghese, entre la fragancia de las flores silvestres y los mármoles cubiertos de verdín. Todo le resultaba placentero; nunca hasta entonces había encontrado placer en tantas cosas al mismo tiempo. Se renovaban en él impresiones antiguas, gozos del pasado. Una noche, tras regresar a la habitación del hotel, escribió un soneto que tituló «Roma revisitada». Uno o dos días después le mostró a Isabel aquella muestra de verso correcto e ingenioso, y le explicó que era costumbre italiana conmemorar los acontecimientos de la vida rindiendo tributo a las musas.

Por lo general, experimentaba tales placeres en soledad. Con excesiva frecuencia (él habría sido el primero en reconocerlo), tenía conciencia excesiva de la existencia de lo erróneo, de la fealdad; y muy rara vez impregnaba su espíritu el rocío fecundo de una felicidad imaginable. Sin embargo, en aquel momento se sentía feliz, acaso mucho más de lo que en la vida se había sentido, y dicho sentimiento tenía una sólida razón de ser. Se debía lisa y llanamente a la sensación de triunfo, la emoción más grata al corazón humano. Osmond no la había experimentado nunca en demasía; en ese sentido, la saciedad le causaba irritación, como él bien sabía y se recordaba a menudo a sí mismo. «Ah, no, no estoy echado a perder; está claro que no —se repetía para sus adentros—. Si alcanzo el triunfo antes de morir, me lo habré ganado con creces.» Tenía excesiva predisposición a pensar que para alcanzar dicha bendición era necesario más que nada anhelarla en secreto y limitarse a hacer tan solo ese esfuerzo. Su trayectoria, además, tampoco había estado totalmente desprovista de éxitos; de hecho, de vez en cuando podría hacer creer a algún espectador que se había echado a dormir sobre inciertos laureles. Pero sus triunfos eran, en algunos casos, ya demasiado antiguos, y otros habían resultado demasiado fáciles. El que ahora experimentaba había resultado menos arduo de lo que cabría esperar; pero había sido fácil, es decir, rápido, tan solo porque el esfuerzo realizado había sido verdaderamente excepcional, mucho mayor del que se habría creído capaz. El sueño de su juventud había sido tener algo que mostrar como prueba de sus esfuerzos, cualquier cosa; pero, con el paso de los años, las condiciones que toda prueba de algo excepcional lleva emparejadas le habían resultado cada vez más groseras, y detestables; como ponerse a trasegar jarras de cerveza para demostrar el aguante. Si un dibujo anónimo colgado en la pared de un museo fuese consciente y se mostrase vigilante, podría haber experimentado ese placer tan peculiar de verse al fin reconocido de pronto como obra de un gran maestro, gracias a su estilo tan marcado y tanto tiempo inadvertido. Ese «estilo» era lo que la joven, con un poco de ayuda, había descubierto en él; y ahora, además de disfrutar de él, se encargaría de proclamarlo ante el mundo sin que él tuviera que hacer lo más mínimo. La señorita Archer se encargaría de todo, y la espera de Osmond no habría sido en vano.

Poco antes del momento fijado para su partida de Roma, la joven recibió un telegrama de la señora Touchett redactado en los siguientes términos: «Dejo Florencia cuatro junio hacia Bellaggio, y te llevo si no tienes otros planes. Pero imposible esperar si te entretienes en Roma».

Entretenerse en Roma era muy placentero, pero Isabel había trazado otros planes e hizo saber a su tía que iría de inmediato a reunirse con ella. Informó de ello a Gilbert Osmond, y él le respondió que, dado que pasaba muchos veranos e inviernos en Italia, se quedaría a disfrutar un poco más de la fresca sombra de San Pedro. No regresaría a Florencia hasta diez días después, y para esa fecha ella ya habría partido hacia Bellaggio. De modo que podrían pasar meses antes de que volviera a verla. Tal conversación tuvo lugar en el amplio salón decorado que nuestros amigos tenían a su disposición en el hotel; era ya tarde, y Ralph Touchett debía llevar a su prima a la mañana siguiente a Florencia. Osmond halló sola a la joven; la señorita Stackpole había hecho amistad con una encantadora familia estadounidense que se alojaba en el cuarto piso, y había subido las interminables escaleras para hacerles una visita. Henrietta, cuando estaba de viaje, entablaba amistades con suma facilidad, y había hecho algunas en los vagones de los trenes que contaba entre las más preciadas. Ralph estaba haciendo los preparativos para el viaje del día siguiente, e Isabel estaba sentada sola en medio de una exuberante profusión de tapicería amarilla. Las butacas y los sofás eran de color naranja; las paredes y ventanas estaban revestidas de oro y púrpura. Los espejos y los cuadros tenían marcos enormes y ostentosos; el techo alto y abovedado estaba decorado con musas y querubines desnudos. A Osmond el lugar le parecía espantoso; aquellos falsos colores, aquel fingido esplendor, eran como palabras embusteras, vulgares y pretenciosas. Isabel tenía entre las manos un libro de Ampère que le había regalado Ralph a su llegada a Roma; pero aunque lo tenía en el regazo y marcaba con el dedo vagamente la página, no sentía mucha impaciencia por proseguir su estudio. Una lámpara, cubierta por un lánguido velo de papel rosa, ardía sobre la mesa a su lado y teñía la escena de una extraña palidez rosada.

—Usted dice que volverá, pero ¿quién sabe? —dijo Gilbert Osmond—. Creo que es mucho más probable que inicie usted ese viaje alrededor del mundo. No tiene obligación alguna de volver; puede hacer exactamente lo que le apetezca; vagar sin rumbo por el espacio.

—Bueno —repuso Isabel—, Italia forma parte del espacio y puedo incluirla en el recorrido.

—¿En su recorrido alrededor del mundo? Por favor, no haga tal cosa. No nos coloque usted en un paréntesis. Dedíquenos un capítulo entero. No quiero verla mientras esté de viaje. Preferiría hacerlo cuando llegue a su término. Me gustaría verla cuando esté ya cansada y saciada —añadió Osmond tras una breve pausa—. Preferiría verla en ese estado.

Isabel, con la mirada baja, manoseó las páginas del libro de Ampère.

—Usted ridiculiza las cosas sin que lo parezca, aunque, según creo, no lo haga involuntariamente. No siente respeto alguno por mis viajes… los encuentra ridículos.

—¿De dónde saca usted eso?

Ella continuó en igual tono mientras frotaba el lomo del libro con un abrecartas.

—Usted advierte mi ignorancia, mis errores, la forma en que vago de aquí para allá como si el mundo me perteneciese, simplemente porque… porque me hayan proporcionado los medios para que así sea. Usted no cree que una mujer deba hacer algo así. Lo considera osado y poco elegante.

—Yo creo que es maravilloso —dijo Osmond—. Usted conoce mis opiniones… ya la he puesto al corriente de bastantes de ellas. ¿Acaso no recuerda que le dije que uno debe hacer de su propia vida una obra de arte? Al principio pareció sobresaltarse; pero a continuación le dije que me parecía que eso era precisamente lo que estaba usted tratando de hacer con la suya.

Isabel levantó los ojos del libro.

—Lo que usted más desprecia en el mundo es el arte malo, el arte estúpido.

—Es muy posible. Pero el suyo me parece excelente y diáfano.

—Si se me ocurriera ir a Japón el próximo invierno, se reiría de mí —prosiguió Isabel.

Osmond esbozó una amplia sonrisa, pero que no llegó a convertirse en risa porque el tono de la conversación no era jocoso. Isabel de hecho mostraba aquella solemnidad que ya había observado en otras ocasiones.

—¡Tiene usted una imaginación asombrosa!

—A eso me refería precisamente. Usted cree que tal idea es absurda.

—Yo daría el dedo meñique por ir a Japón; es uno de los países que más deseo conocer. ¿No me cree, conociendo mi afición por la laca antigua?

—Pero yo no tengo la excusa de la laca antigua —contestó Isabel.

—Usted tiene una excusa mejor todavía: los medios para ir. Está muy equivocada con su teoría de que me río de usted. No sé por qué razón se le ha metido eso en la cabeza.

—No sería nada sorprendente que a usted le pareciese ridículo que yo tenga medios para viajar y usted no; porque usted lo sabe todo y yo no sé nada.

—Razón de más para que viaje y aprenda —dijo Osmond sonriendo—. Además —añadió, como para dejarlo bien claro—, yo no lo sé todo.

A Isabel no le pareció extraño que dijera aquello con tanta seriedad; estaba pensando que la etapa más agradable de su vida (así le gustaba calificar aquellos breves días en Roma, en los que podría haberse comparado con la figura de una princesita vestida con ropajes de otras épocas, agobiada bajo el manto ceremonial y arrastrando una cola sostenida por pajes o historiadores), que toda aquella felicidad, estaba tocando a su fin. Que la mayor parte del interés de aquellos días fuera atribuible al señor Osmond era una reflexión que en esos momentos no le interesaba hacer; ya había hecho la debida justicia al hecho. Pero se dijo a sí misma que si existía peligro de que no volviesen a verse, tal vez fuese lo mejor después de todo. Los acontecimientos felices no se repiten, y su aventura ofrecía ya la perspectiva cambiante y marinera de una isla romántica de la que, tras haberse dado un festín de uvas negras, estuviese zarpando al levantarse la brisa. Quizá al regresar a Italia se encontrase con que aquel hombre había cambiado, aquel hombre tan extraño que le gustaba tal como era; y sería mejor no volver que correr ese riesgo. Pero si no había de volver, mayor resultaba la pena de dar el capítulo por cerrado. Durante unos momentos sintió una punzada de dolor que a punto estuvo de hacer brotar sus lágrimas. La sensación la hizo enmudecer, y Gilbert Osmond se mantuvo también en silencio, sin dejar de mirarla.

—Vaya a todas partes —dijo al fin en voz baja y cariñosa—; haga cuanto quiera; aproveche todo lo que la vida le ofrece. Sea dichosa; alcance el triunfo.

—¿Qué quiere decir con que alcance el triunfo?

—Pues que haga lo que le guste.

—En ese caso, a mi modo de ver, triunfar sería fracasar. Hacer todas las cosas vanas que a uno le gustan resulta a menudo harto aburrido.

—Exactamente —dijo Osmond con sosegada prontitud—. Como le he dicho hace un momento, acabará por cansarse algún día. —Hizo una breve pausa y luego prosiguió—: No sé si no sería mejor esperar hasta entonces para decirle algo que quiero que sepa.

—Pues yo no puedo aconsejarle sin saber de qué se trata. Pero cuando me siento cansada, soy muy desagradable —añadió con su acostumbrada inconsecuencia.

—No lo creo. Se enfadará a veces, eso sí que puedo creerlo, aunque nunca lo haya presenciado. Pero estoy seguro de que jamás se pone desagradable.

—¿Ni aun cuando pierdo los estribos?

—Usted no los pierde, los encuentra… y debe de ser precioso —dijo Osmond con noble seriedad—. Deben de ser momentos dignos de ver.

—¡Ojalá pudiera encontrarlos ahora! —exclamó Isabel nerviosa.

—A mí no me asusta, me cruzaría de brazos y me dedicaría a admirarla. Estoy hablando muy en serio. —Se inclinó hacia delante, con una mano sobre cada rodilla, y bajó la mirada al suelo unos instantes—. Lo que quiero decirle —prosiguió al fin, alzando de nuevo los ojos— es que he descubierto que me he enamorado de usted.

Isabel se levantó al instante y exclamó:

—¡Guárdese esas palabras para cuando esté ya cansada!

—¿Cansada de oír cómo otros se lo dicen? —Siguió sentado y alzó hacia ella la mirada—. No, usted puede tenerlo en cuenta ahora o nunca, como guste. Pero, en cualquier caso, tengo que decírselo ahora.

Isabel se había dado la vuelta, pero al girarse se detuvo un instante y posó en él sus ojos. Los dos permanecieron así un tiempo, cruzando entre ellos una larga mirada: la mirada detenida y consciente de los momentos críticos de la vida. Por fin él se levantó, se aproximó y, en actitud profundamente respetuosa, como temiendo haberse comportado con excesiva confianza, declaró:

—Estoy perdidamente enamorado de usted.

Al repetir la declaración lo había hecho en un tono de discreción casi impersonal, como quien espera bien poca cosa de ello pero necesita hacerla para así lograr el alivio necesario. A Isabel se le llenaron de lágrimas los ojos: en

esta ocasión obedecían a una intensa punzada de dolor que por alguna razón le hizo pensar en un delicado cerrojo al deslizarse, no habría podido precisar si para abrirse o para cerrarse. Tras aquellas palabras, Osmond, inmóvil ante ella, se le antojó hermoso y generoso, como si al pronunciarlas se hubiese investido del aire dorado del temprano otoño. Sin embargo, la joven, todavía ante él, retrocedió en espíritu al oírlas de igual modo que había retrocedido antes en situaciones similares.

—Por favor, no diga eso —respondió con una intensidad que delataba también ahora el miedo a verse obligada a escoger y decidir.

Lo que acrecentaba aún más su temor era precisamente aquella fuerza que, en apariencia, debía haber hecho desvanecer todo temor: la conciencia de lo que había en su corazón. Era terrible tener que rendirse a eso. Era como tener una cuantiosa suma depositada en un banco y sentir terror ante la sola idea de tener que empezar a gastarla. Bastaría un roce y se consumiría por completo.

—Supongo que no le importará mucho —dijo Osmond—. Tengo demasiado poco que ofrecerle. Lo que yo tengo es suficiente para mí, pero no para usted. Ni tengo fortuna, ni renombre, ni ventajas añadidas de ningún tipo. De manera que no le ofrezco nada. Se lo digo únicamente porque no creo que con ello la ofenda, y porque algún día tal vez le agrade. Para mí es un placer, se lo aseguro —añadió, de pie ante ella, un poco inclinado hacia delante en actitud deferente, mientras hacía girar lentamente entre las manos el sombrero, que había cogido, con un movimiento que mostraba todo el recatado temblor del azoramiento y nada de su incomodidad, presentando ante ella su rostro firme, refinado y ligeramente demacrado—. No me causa dolor alguno, porque es algo muy sencillo. Para mí será usted siempre la mujer más importante del mundo.

Isabel se imaginó a sí misma en dicho papel, con mucho detenimiento, y concluyó que lo representaba con cierta elegancia. Sin embargo, lo que dijo no fue en modo alguno expresión de dicha complacencia.

—Usted no me ofende, pero no olvide que, sin llegar a sentirse ofendida, puede una sentirse incomodada y turbada.

Se oyó a sí misma decir la palabra «incomodada» y le pareció ridícula. Pero, por estúpido que fuese, fue la que se le ocurrió.

—No lo olvido. Es natural que se sienta sorprendida y desconcertada. Pero, si no es más que eso, no tardará en pasar. Y tal vez deje algo de lo que yo no tenga por qué avergonzarme.

—Ignoro lo que pueda dejar. En cualquier caso, como puede usted ver no estoy abrumada —dijo Isabel con una sonrisa un tanto pálida—. No estoy tan turbada como para no poder pensar. Y pienso que me alegro de que nos separemos, de marcharme mañana de Roma.

—Ni que decir tiene que en eso no estoy de acuerdo con usted.

—Yo no lo conozco a usted en absoluto —replicó Isabel con brusquedad, y se ruborizó al oírse diciendo lo que ya dijera casi un año antes a lord Warburton.

—Si no se marchara podría conocerme mejor.

—Ya lo haré en algún otro momento.

—Así lo espero. Soy bien fácil de conocer.

Ella contestó con gran énfasis:

—No, no; en eso no es sincero. Usted no es nada fácil de conocer. Es imposible serlo menos.

—Bueno —repuso él riendo—, lo he dicho porque yo sí me conozco. Puede parecer una fanfarronería, pero así es.

—Es muy posible. Pero usted es muy juicioso.

—¡Y usted también, señorita Archer! —exclamó Osmond.

—No me siento así en este momento, aunque sí lo bastante para pensar que será mejor que se vaya. Buenas noches.

—Dios la bendiga —dijo Gilbert Osmond, tomándole la mano que ella no acertaba a tenderle. Después añadió—: Si volvemos a vernos, me encontrará usted igual que me deja. Y, si no nos vemos, yo seguiré siendo siempre el mismo de todos modos.

—Se lo agradezco mucho. Adiós.

Había cierta firmeza sosegada en el visitante de Isabel: se iría por voluntad propia, no porque lo despidiesen.

—Hay algo más. Yo no le he pedido nada, ni siquiera que tenga un pensamiento para mí en el futuro, eso tiene que reconocérmelo. Sin embargo, hay un pequeño favor que quisiera pedirle. No regresaré a casa hasta dentro de unos días. Roma es deliciosa y el lugar apropiado para un hombre en mi estado de ánimo. Ah, sé que a usted la apena marcharse, pero está bien que haga lo que su tía desea.

—¡Ella ni siquiera lo desea! —exclamó Isabel en un extraño tono.

Osmond dio la impresión de estar a punto de decir algo que respondiese a tales palabras, pero cambió de idea y se limitó a comentar:

—En cualquier caso, es correcto que vaya usted con ella, muy correcto. Haga siempre lo correcto; esa es mi norma. Perdone si resulto condescendiente. Usted dice que no me conoce, pero, cuando me conozca, verá la devoción que siento por la corrección.

—Es usted un hombre convencional, ¿no? —preguntó Isabel con gravedad.

—Me gusta cómo pronuncia esa palabra. No, no es que sea convencional: soy la convención personificada. ¿No lo comprende? —Y se interrumpió un instante, sonriendo—. Me gustaría explicárselo. —Y de pronto, en un arranque de naturalidad e inspiración, le suplicó—: Vuelva usted. Hay tantas cosas de las que podríamos hablar…

Isabel permaneció inmóvil con la mirada baja.

—¿A qué favor se refería usted hace un momento?

—Antes de abandonar Florencia vaya a ver a mi hija. Está sola en la villa; decidí no enviarla a casa de mi hermana porque esta no comparte en absoluto mis ideas. Dígale que debe querer mucho a su pobre padre —dijo con dulzura Osmond.

—Será un verdadero placer para mí ir a verla —respondió Isabel—. Le transmitiré lo que ha dicho. Una vez más, adiós.

Al oír esas palabras, Osmond se despidió rápida y respetuosamente. Una vez que se hubo marchado, Isabel se quedó un momento mirando a su alrededor para acabar sentándose lentamente, con aire de deliberación. Permaneció allí sentada, con las manos entrelazadas y la mirada clavada en la espantosa alfombra, hasta que volvieron sus compañeros. Su agitación, que no había decrecido, era muy intensa, muy honda. Lo que acababa de ocurrir era algo para lo que su imaginación llevaba preparándose desde hacía una semana. Pero ahora, llegado el momento, se había frenado… y aquel principio sublime que la guiaba se había venido en cierto modo abajo. La forma de proceder del espíritu de nuestra joven dama era extraña y tan solo puedo referirles a ustedes lo que yo veo, sin pretender en absoluto que resulte algo natural. Como ya he dicho, su imaginación se frenó: quedaba un último espacio difuso que no podía atravesar, una extensión sombría e incierta que parecía ambigua e incluso un tanto traicionera, como un páramo entrevisto a la luz del crepúsculo invernal. Pero aun así habría de cruzarla.

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Regresó a Florencia al día siguiente en compañía de su primo, y Ralph Touchett, aunque normalmente se impacientaba al tener que someterse a la disciplina del ferrocarril, disfrutó de las sucesivas horas pasadas en el tren que alejaba a su compañera de la ciudad que ahora se distinguía por la preferencia de Gilbert Osmond, unas horas que formarían parte de la primera etapa de un plan de viaje más prolongado. La señorita Stackpole se había quedado en Roma; planeaba un pequeño viaje a Nápoles, que iba a emprender con la ayuda del señor Bantling. Isabel dispondría de tres días en Florencia antes del 4 de junio, fecha de la partida de la señora Touchett, y había decidido dedicar el último día a cumplir su promesa de visitar a Pansy Osmond. Su plan, sin embargo, pareció verse por un momento ligeramente alterado a causa de una sugerencia de madame Merle. Esta señora se encontraba todavía en casa de los Touchett, pero también estaba a punto de partir de Florencia, siendo su siguiente parada un viejo castillo en las montañas de la Toscana, residencia de una noble familia de aquella región, cuya amistad (los conocía, decía ella, «desde siempre») le parecía a Isabel, a la luz de ciertas fotografías de la inmensa morada con almenas que su amiga le había enseñado, un preciado tesoro. Isabel le explicó a la afortunada dama que el señor Osmond le había pedido que fuese a ver a su hija, aunque no mencionó que también le había hecho una declaración de amor.

—*Ah, comme cela se trouve!* —exclamó la señora Merle—. Yo también he estado pensando que sería un amable detalle visitar a la niña antes de marcharme.

—Entonces podemos ir juntas —dijo Isabel con sensatez: «sensatez» porque hizo la propuesta con poco entusiasmo.

Había planeado hacer su pequeño peregrinaje a solas, lo prefería así. No obstante, estaba dispuesta a sacrificar este sentimiento místico por la gran consideración que le tenía a su amiga.

Esta, sin embargo, meditó con detenimiento y al final declaró:

—Después de todo, ¿por qué ir las dos, teniendo ambas tanto que hacer durante estas últimas horas?

—De acuerdo, puedo ir sola sin problemas.

—No sé qué pensar acerca de que vaya sola… a la casa de un atractivo soltero. Estuvo casado, ¡pero hace tanto tiempo!

—Estando el señor Osmond fuera, ¿qué más da? —preguntó Isabel con gesto serio.

—Ellos no saben que está fuera, ¿comprende?

—¿Ellos? ¿A quiénes se refiere?

—A todo el mundo. Pero quizá no sea importante.

—Si usted pensaba ir, ¿por qué yo no? —preguntó Isabel.

—Porque yo soy una vieja cascada y usted una bella jovencita.

—Aun admitiendo eso, usted no se ha comprometido a ir.

—¡Qué bien cumple usted sus promesas! —exclamó la dama de más edad con suave tono de burla.

—Valoro mucho mis promesas. ¿Le sorprende?

—Tiene razón —reflexionó en voz alta madame Merle—. Estoy segura de que quiere ser amable con la pequeña.

—Deseo mucho ser amable con ella.

—Vaya a verla entonces; nadie se lo tendrá en cuenta. Y dígale que habría ido yo de no hacerlo usted. O mejor —añadió madame Merle—, no se lo diga. No le importará.

Mientras avanzaba en un coche abierto, a la vista de todos, por el camino serpenteante que conducía a la casa del señor Osmond en lo alto de la colina, Isabel se preguntaba qué había querido decir su amiga con lo de que nadie se lo tendría en cuenta. De vez en cuando, muy de tarde en tarde, aquella mujer, cuyo gusto viajero era, por regla general, más acorde con el mar abierto que con los peligrosos canales, dejaba caer frases de significado ambiguo, notas que sonaban falsas. ¿Qué le importaban a Isabel Archer las vulgares opiniones de gente insignificante? ¿Y suponía madame Merle que era capaz de hacer algo que tuviese que hacerse a escondidas? Claro que no: debía referirse a algo distinto, algo que con las prisas de las horas que precedían a su marcha no había tenido tiempo de explicar. Isabel retomaría este tema algún día, había ciertas cuestiones en las que quería ser clara. Oyó a Pansy tocando el piano en otra habitación mientras la conducían al salón del señor Osmond. La niña estaba «practicando», y a Isabel le agradó

pensar que llevaba a cabo esta actividad con rigor. Pansy entró de inmediato en la estancia alisándose el vestido e hizo los honores de la casa de su padre con una cortesía atenta y sincera. Isabel permaneció allí sentada media hora y Pansy estuvo a la altura de la ocasión, como una pequeña hada alada en una pantomima que flota en el aire con la ayuda de hilos invisibles: no parloteando, sino conversando, y mostrando el mismo interés respetuoso por los asuntos de Isabel que la joven se tomaba por los suyos. Isabel quedó maravillada; nunca se había ofrecido tan directamente a su olfato la blanca flor de la dulzura cultivada. ¡Qué bien había sido educada la niña, se dijo nuestra admirada joven; con cuánto acierto la habían orientado y moldeado; y sin embargo, qué sencilla, natural e inocente seguía siendo! A Isabel le gustaba mucho analizar el carácter y la calidad de la gente, ahondar, como quien dice, en los profundos misterios personales, y le había agradado dudar, hasta ese momento, de si aquel tierno esqueje en realidad no lo sabría ya todo. ¿No sería su extrema franqueza la demostración de un perfecto conocimiento de sí misma? ¿Era una pose adoptada para agradar a las visitas que recibía su padre, o más bien la expresión directa de una naturaleza sin tacha? La hora que pasó Isabel en las preciosas salas vacías y en penumbra del señor Osmond (las ventanas estaban entornadas para evitar el calor, y aquí y allá, a través de algunas rendijas, la luz del espléndido día veraniego se filtraba con un destello de color apagado o de oro viejo en la densa oscuridad), la conversación con la hija del dueño de la casa, como digo, resolvió toda duda al respecto. Pansy era realmente una página en blanco, una superficie de pureza cándida conservada con éxito. No tenía artes, astucia, genio ni talento… tan solo dos o tres pequeños y exquisitos instintos: para reconocer a un amigo, para evitar errores, para cuidar de un juguete viejo o un vestido nuevo. No obstante, aquella ternura suya la hacía conmovedora, y transmitía la sensación de que sería víctima fácil del destino. No tendría voluntad ni fuerza para resistir, ni conciencia de su propia importancia; sería fácil de engañar y aplastar: su única fuerza consistiría en saber cuándo y a qué asirse. Pansy acompañó por la casa a su visitante, que había solicitado ver de nuevo las otras estancias, y la muchacha dio su opinión acerca de algunas de las obras de arte allí expuestas. Le habló de sus proyectos, de sus ocupaciones, de las intenciones de su padre. No se mostró egocéntrica, pero consideró apropiado ofrecer toda la información que una huésped tan distinguida naturalmente esperaría.

—Dígame, por favor —solicitó—, ¿fue papá a visitar a la madre Catherine en Roma? Me dijo que lo haría si tenía tiempo. Tal vez no lo tuviese. A papá le gusta hacer las cosas con tiempo. Quería hablar con ella de mi educación; aún no ha terminado, ¿sabe? No sé qué más pueden hacer conmigo, pero parece que todavía falta mucho para terminarla. Papá me dijo un día que pensaba encargarse él mismo de completarla, puesto que en el convento, durante el último año o dos, los maestros que enseñan a las niñas mayores resultan muy caros. Papá no es rico y me daría mucha pena que tuviese que pagar mucho dinero por mí, porque no creo que yo me lo merezca. No aprendo lo suficientemente rápido, y no tengo memoria. Para lo que me dicen, sí, especialmente si me gusta, pero no para lo que aprendo en los libros. Había una niña que era mi mejor amiga y se la llevaron del convento, cuando tenía catorce años, para hacerle… ¿cómo se dice…?, para hacerle una *dot*. ¿No se dice así en inglés? Confío en no haberme equivocado; lo que quiero decir es que querían guardar el dinero para casarla. No sé si papá quiere guardar el dinero para eso… para casarme. ¡Es tan cara una boda! —Pansy exhaló un leve suspiro y continuó—: Me parece que papá podría estar ahorrando ese dinero. De todos modos todavía soy demasiado joven para pensar en eso y no me gusta ningún caballero; ninguno excepto él, quiero decir. Si no fuera mi padre me gustaría casarme con él; prefiero ser su hija que la mujer de… de algún desconocido. Le echo mucho de menos, pero no tanto como usted pueda pensar, ya que he pasado gran parte del tiempo alejada de él. He estado con papá sobre todo en vacaciones. Casi echo más de menos a la madre Catherine, pero eso no debe decírselo. ¿No va a verle de nuevo? Pues no sabe cuánto lo siento y él también lo va a sentir. De toda la gente que viene por aquí, usted es quien más me gusta. No es un gran cumplido, porque no viene mucha gente. Ha sido muy amable de su parte venir hoy, con lo lejos que queda de su casa, pues después de todo no soy todavía más que una niña. Sí, no tengo más distracciones que las de una niña. ¿Cuándo abandonó usted esas distracciones de niña? Me gustaría saber qué edad tiene, pero no sé si es correcto preguntarlo. En el convento nos enseñaron que nunca se debe preguntar la edad. No me gusta hacer cosas que no sean apropiadas, da la impresión de que no se ha recibido la educación adecuada. A mí… tampoco a mí me gustaría que me pillaran por sorpresa. Papá dejó instrucciones para todo. Me acuesto muy temprano. Cuando el sol da en el otro lado, salgo al jardín. Papá dio órdenes estrictas de no permitir que el sol me queme la piel. La vista desde aquí me gusta mucho, las montañas son muy hermosas. En Roma, desde el convento, no veíamos más que tejados y campanarios. Practico el piano tres horas al día, pero no toco muy bien. ¿Usted también toca? Me gustaría mucho que interpretara algo para mí; papá opina que debo escuchar buena música. Madame Merle ha tocado para mí en varias ocasiones; es lo que más

me gusta de madame Merle, tiene una gran facilidad. Yo nunca tendré esa facilidad. Y tampoco tengo buena voz… solo una vocecita como el chirrido de un pizarrín al hacer garabatos.

Isabel satisfizo aquel respetuoso deseo, se despojó de los guantes y se sentó al piano mientras Pansy, de pie a su lado, contemplaba cómo sus blancas manos se deslizaban rápidas sobre las teclas. Cuando terminó, se despidió de la niña con un beso, la abrazó con cariño y la miró durante largo rato.

—Sé muy buena —le dijo—, y haz feliz a tu padre.

—Creo que eso es para lo que vivo —respondió Pansy—. Él no tiene muchas alegrías, es más bien un hombre triste.

Isabel escuchó esta afirmación con un interés que le resultó casi un tormento verse obligada a disimular. Era su orgullo lo que la obligaba a hacerlo, y cierto sentido de la decencia. Había todavía otras cosas en su cabeza que sentía un fuerte impulso, reprimido al instante, de decirle a Pansy acerca de su padre. Había cosas que le habría encantado escuchar de sus labios, o lograr que dijera la niña. Pero nada más percatarse de estos pensamientos, su imaginación quedaba acallada por el horror ante la idea de aprovecharse de la niña (pues de tal cosa se habría acusado), y de exhalar en aquel ambiente donde él pudiese quizá percibir un hálito, una bocanada de aire que revelase su estado de encantamiento. Había venido; lo había hecho, pero solo había estado una hora. Se levantó rápidamente del taburete. Pero incluso entonces se demoró un instante, abrazada aún a su pequeña acompañante, estrechando contra sí a la dulce y esbelta chiquilla mientras la miraba casi con envidia. Se vio obligada a confesarse que le habría proporcionado un intenso placer hablar de Gilbert Osmond con aquella criatura inocente y diminuta que estaba tan cercana a él. Pero no dijo palabra y se limitó a besar a Pansy una vez más. Cruzaron juntas el vestíbulo hasta la puerta que daba al patio; una vez allí, su pequeña anfitriona se detuvo, y miró hacia fuera con anhelo.

—No puedo ir más lejos. Le prometí a papá que no cruzaría esta puerta.

—Haces bien en obedecerle; él nunca va a pedirte nada que no sea razonable.

—Yo siempre voy a obedecerle. Pero ¿cuándo volverá usted?

—Me temo que no será hasta dentro de mucho tiempo.

—Yo espero que lo haga tan pronto como pueda. Solo soy una chiquilla —dijo Pansy—, pero siempre la estaré esperando.

Y la pequeña figura permaneció en el alto y oscuro umbral, viendo a Isabel cruzar el patio claro y gris y desaparecer en el resplandor de la tarde por el enorme *portone*, que al abrirse dejó entrar luz a raudales.

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Isabel no regresó a Florencia hasta pasados varios meses, un intervalo que estuvo lo suficientemente repleto de incidentes. Sin embargo, no es lo sucedido en el transcurso de ese intervalo lo que nos interesa con respecto a la joven; nuestra atención se centra de nuevo en ella cierto día de finales de primavera, poco después de su regreso al palazzo Crescentini y un año después de los acontecimientos recientemente narrados. En esta ocasión se encontraba sola en una pequeña estancia de las muchas que la señora Touchett destinaba a usos sociales, y se apreciaba algo en su expresión y en su actitud que indicaba que se encontraba a la espera de recibir una visita. La alta ventana alta estaba abierta y, aunque los postigos verdes estaban entrecerrados, el aire resplandeciente del jardín entraba a través de un amplio intersticio e inundaba la estancia de calor y perfume. Nuestra joven permaneció un rato junto a la ventana, las manos unidas tras la espalda, la mirada perdida en la distancia, presa de un vago desasosiego. Estaba preocupada, demasiado impaciente para sentarse, para trabajar, para leer. Sin embargo, no podía pretender vislumbrar al visitante antes de que este entrase en la casa, ya que la entrada al palacio no se hacía a través del jardín, donde siempre reinaban la quietud y la intimidad. Más bien deseaba anticiparse a su llegada mediante una serie de conjeturas y, a juzgar por la expresión de su rostro, eso la mantenía bien ocupada. Se sentía llena de gravedad y ciertamente más abrumada, como bajo el peso de la experiencia de aquel lapso de un año que había dedicado a ver mundo. Como ella habría dicho, había recorrido el espacio, había visto mucho de la humanidad y, por lo tanto, ahora era, a sus propios ojos, una persona muy distinta de la joven frívola de Albany que había empezado a hacerse una idea de Europa sobre el césped de Gardencourt un par de años atrás. Se congratulaba de haber cosechado sabiduría y aprendido mucho más de la vida de lo que aquella criatura superficial habría podido sospechar jamás. Si sus pensamientos se hubieran orientado en aquel momento hacia el recuerdo, en vez de aletear nerviosos sobre el presente, habrían evocado toda una multitud de imágenes interesantes. Estas habrían sido tanto de paisajes como de personajes, estos últimos habrían sido los más numerosos. Ya estamos familiarizados con algunas de las personas que habrían podido aparecer en ese campo visual. Aparecería, por ejemplo, la conciliadora Lily, hermana de nuestra heroína y esposa de Edmund Ludlow, que había abandonado Nueva York para pasar cinco meses en compañía de Isabel. Había dejado atrás a su esposo, pero se había traído con ella a los niños, con quienes Isabel había adoptado el papel de tía soltera con tanta generosidad como ternura. Hacia el final de aquella temporada el señor Ludlow había conseguido arrancar unas pocas semanas a sus hazañas jurídicas y, cruzando el océano con gran celeridad, había pasado un mes con las dos mujeres en París antes de regresar a casa con su esposa. Los pequeños Ludlow aún no tenían edad para hacer turismo, ni siquiera desde el punto de vista norteamericano, de modo que, mientras su hermana estuvo con ella, Isabel había confinado sus movimientos a un círculo muy estrecho. Lily y los pequeños se habían reunido con ella en Suiza en el mes de julio y habían pasado un verano de clima agradable en un valle alpino donde las flores crecían profusamente en los prados y la sombra de grandes castaños ofrecía lugares de reposo en los paseos que emprendían las mujeres y los niños en las tardes cálidas. Llegaron después a la capital francesa, que Lily adoraba y a la que dedicaba costosas ceremonias, pero que no era más que un lugar ruidosamente vacuo para Isabel, quien durante aquellos días hacía uso de sus recuerdos de Roma como si fueran un frasco de sales oculto en el pañuelo para contrarrestar el ambiente de una habitación calurosa y llena de gente.

Como ya he dicho, la señora Ludlow consagraba sus ofrendas a París, y aun así tenía dudas y perplejidades que ese altar no resolvía; y después de que su marido se reuniera con ella se sintió más desilusionada por no lograr hacerle partícipe de sus especulaciones. El motivo de todas ellas era Isabel, pero Edmund Ludlow, como siempre había hecho, rechazaba dejarse sorprender, preocupar, confundir o maravillar por cualquier cosa que su cuñada hiciese o dejase de hacer. Las reflexiones de la señora Ludlow eran muy variadas. A veces pensaba que lo más natural sería que la joven volviera y se instalase en una casa en Nueva York, por ejemplo en la de los Rossiter, que tenía un elegante jardín de invierno y estaba a la vuelta de la esquina de su propia morada; otras veces, no podía ocultar su sorpresa ante el hecho de que su hermana no se casara con algún miembro de una de las grandes aristocracias. En conjunto, como ya he dicho, todas aquellas posibilidades se le escapaban de las manos. La había alegrado que Isabel heredara una fortuna más que si el dinero hubiese sido para ella; le había parecido que ofrecía el escenario perfecto para la figura

un tanto frágil, pero no por ello menos eminente, de su hermana. Sin embargo, Isabel había prosperado menos de lo que Lily consideraba adecuado. Lo que ella entendía como prosperar tenía una misteriosa conexión con visitas matutinas y fiestas vespertinas. Intelectualmente, sin duda, había logrado inmensos avances, pero no parecía haber alcanzado muchas de las conquistas sociales cuyos trofeos la señora Ludlow había tenido la esperanza de poder admirar. La concepción de Lily de tales logros era muy vaga, pero eso era exactamente lo que había esperado de Isabel: que les diera forma y cuerpo. A Isabel podría haberle ido igual de bien en Nueva York, y la señora Ludlow consultaba a su marido para averiguar si había algún privilegio del que disfrutar en Europa que la sociedad de Nueva York no pudiera ofrecer. Sabemos bien que Isabel había hecho conquistas: que fueran o no inferiores a las que podía haber logrado en su tierra natal sería una cuestión difícil de dilucidar; y me permito mencionar de nuevo, no con poca satisfacción, que no había hecho públicas estas honorables victorias. No le había contado a su hermana la historia de lord Warburton, ni le había dado pista alguna acerca del estado de ánimo del señor Osmond; y la única razón de su silencio era que no quería hablar. Era más romántico no decir nada y, bebiendo profundamente, en secreto, de aquella novela romántica, tenía tan pocas ganas de pedir consejo a la pobre Lily como de cerrar aquel raro y valioso volumen para siempre. Pero Lily desconocía estas negativas y solo podía calificar la carrera de su hermana como un extraño anticlímax, impresión confirmada por el hecho de que el silencio de Isabel acerca del señor Osmond, por ejemplo, era directamente proporcional a la frecuencia con que el caballero ocupaba sus pensamientos. Como esto sucedía muy a menudo, la señora Ludlow pensaba a veces que había perdido su ánimo valeroso. Es evidente que un resultado tan extraño de un evento tan jubiloso como es heredar una fortuna dejaba perpleja a la alegre Lily y corroboraba su impresión general de que Isabel no se parecía en nada al resto de la gente.

El valeroso ánimo de la joven dama, sin embargo, pareció alcanzar las cimas más altas una vez que sus parientes se hubieron marchado. Podía imaginar situaciones que exigieran más valor que pasar el invierno en París (París tenía aspectos en los que se parecía mucho a Nueva York, París era como la prosa elegante y pulcra), y su correspondencia íntima con madame Merle tenía mucho que ver con el estímulo de aquellos vuelos. Nunca había tenido una sensación tan intensa de libertad, de la audacia absoluta y lo gratuito de la libertad, como cuando se alejaba del andén de la estación de Euston un día de finales de noviembre, tras la partida del tren que llevaba a la pobre Lily, su marido y sus hijos al barco que les esperaba en Liverpool. Se alegraba de haberles agasajado, era plenamente consciente de ello. Era muy observadora, como ya sabemos, de lo que era bueno para ella, y su interés por encontrar algo lo bastante bueno era constante. Había hecho el viaje desde París con los poco envidiados viajeros para aprovechar la situación de la que gozaba hasta el último momento. Los habría acompañado también hasta Liverpool de no haberle pedido Edmund Ludlow, como un favor, que no lo hiciera; Lily se inquietaba y hacía todo tipo de preguntas absurdas. Isabel contempló el tren que partía, lanzó un beso con la mano al mayor de sus sobrinitos, chiquillo muy efusivo que asomaba peligrosamente medio cuerpo por la ventana del vagón y que convirtió la separación en una ocasión de escandalosa hilaridad, y luego se volvió a internar en las brumosas calles de Londres. El mundo se extendía ante ella, podía hacer cualquier cosa que quisiera. Sentía una profunda emoción, pero por el momento su elección fue razonablemente discreta: decidió simplemente regresar a pie desde Euston Square a su hotel. Caía ya el crepúsculo temprano de una tarde de noviembre: las farolas de las calles brillaban con una débil luz rojiza en el aire denso y oscuro; nuestra joven iba sola y Euston Square quedaba bastante lejos de Piccadilly. Pero Isabel recorrió el trayecto disfrutando plenamente de sus peligros y se perdió casi a propósito, para captar más sensaciones, de modo que se sintió decepcionada cuando un amable policía la guió correctamente de nuevo. Le gustaba tanto el espectáculo de la vida humana que gozó incluso del aspecto del anochecer en las calles de Londres: las multitudes en movimiento, los coches apresurados, las tiendas iluminadas, los tenderetes resplandecientes, la humedad oscura y brillante de todo cuanto la rodeaba. Aquella noche, en su hotel, escribió a madame Merle que partiría hacia Roma un par de días después. Hizo el trayecto a Roma sin detenerse en Florencia, pasando primero por Venecia y continuando luego en dirección sur por Ancona. Llevó a cabo el viaje sin otra ayuda que la de su criado, pues sus protectores naturales no se encontraban entonces en el país. Ralph Touchett se encontraba pasando el invierno en Corfú, y en septiembre la señorita Stackpole había sido reclamada en Norteamérica mediante un telegrama del *Interviewer*. Este diario ofrecía a su brillante corresponsal un campo más fértil para ejercitar su genio que las rancias ciudades de Europa, y, mientras regresaba, Henrietta había recibido con alegría la promesa del señor Bantling de que iría pronto a verla. Isabel escribió a la señora Touchett pidiendo disculpas por no haberse presentado en Florencia, y su tía respondió de un modo muy característico. Las disculpas, según confesaba la señora Touchett, tenían tanto valor como las burbujas, y a ella no le interesaban tales objetos. Las cosas o se hacían o no se hacían, y lo que «podría» haberse hecho pertenecía

al ámbito de lo irrelevante, como la idea de la vida en el más allá o del origen del mundo. Su carta era franca, pero (cosa rara en la señora Touchett) no tanto como pretendía. No le resultaba difícil perdonar a su sobrina por no detenerse en Florencia, pues le pareció una buena señal de que el señor Osmond había perdido parte de su antiguo ascendiente. Se preocupó desde luego por averiguar si él encontraría algún pretexto para ir a Roma, y obtuvo cierta tranquilidad al descubrir que no podía reprochársele ausencia alguna.

Por su parte, Isabel no llevaba ni dos semanas en Roma cuando le propuso a madame Merle hacer una pequeña peregrinación por el este. Madame Merle comentó que su amiga era bastante inquieta, pero añadió que siempre había deseado fervientemente visitar Atenas y Constantinopla. Así pues, las dos mujeres emprendieron la expedición y pasaron tres meses viajando por Grecia, Turquía y Egipto. Isabel encontró muchos aspectos interesantes en estos países, si bien madame Merle continuó recalcando que incluso en los emplazamientos más clásicos, los escenarios ideales para inspirar reposo y reflexión, una cierta incoherencia seguía dominando el espíritu de la joven. Isabel viajaba rápida y temerariamente, era como una persona sedienta bebiendo un vaso tras otro. Mientras tanto, la señora Merle, como la dama de compañía de una princesa que viajara de incógnito, le seguía los pasos casi jadeante. Iba invitada por Isabel y aportaba toda la dignidad necesaria a la irrefrenable ansiedad de la joven. Desempeñaba su papel con el tacto que cabía esperar de ella, pasando inadvertida y aceptando la posición de una compañera cuyos gastos eran profusamente cubiertos. La situación, sin embargo, no planteaba problema alguno, y la gente que se encontraba a esta pareja reservada y singular durante sus viajes no habría podido asegurar quién era la acompañante y quién la acompañada. Decir que su impresión de madame Merle había mejorado durante el tiempo transcurrido juntas no haría justicia a la percepción que de ella tenía Isabel, quien desde el principio la había encontrado tan acogedora y encantadora en el trato. Después de tres meses de gran intimidad, Isabel sintió que la conocía mejor; su carácter se había mostrado en su plenitud y aquella admirable mujer también había cumplido al fin la promesa de contarle su historia desde su propio punto de vista, una muestra de confianza tanto más deseada cuanto Isabel ya la había escuchado desde la perspectiva de otras personas. Esta historia era tan triste (en lo que respecta al difunto monsieur Merle, un auténtico aventurero, diría ella, aunque al principio pareciera tan conveniente, que se había aprovechado de su juventud años atrás y de una inexperiencia que sin duda los que la habían conocido más tarde encontrarían difícil de creer), contenía tal cantidad de incidentes asombrosos y lamentables, que su joven compañera llegó a preguntarse cómo una persona tan *éprouvée* podía haber conservado tanta frescura, tanto interés por la vida. Llegó a tener una profunda comprensión de la frescura de madame Merle, la consideró como un rasgo profesional, ligeramente mecánico, algo que paseaba en su estuche como el violín del virtuoso, o que enjaezaba y cepillaba como a la «favorita» del jockey. Seguía pareciéndole tan encantadora como siempre, pero había una esquina del telón que nunca terminaba de levantarse; era como si después de todo siguiera siendo una especie de actriz, condenada a manifestarse solo como un personaje disfrazado y maquillado. Había dicho una vez que procedía de muy lejos, que pertenecía al viejo mundo, e Isabel no se libraba de la impresión de que era el producto de unas circunstancias morales o sociales distintas a las suyas, de que había crecido bajo otras estrellas.

Pensaba entonces que en el fondo tenía una moral diferente. Desde luego, la moral de la gente civilizada siempre tiene muchos aspectos en común; pero nuestra joven tenía la sensación de que en madame Merle había algunos valores que se habían deteriorado o, como dicen en los comercios, rebajado. Pensaba, con la presunción de la juventud, que una moral que fuera diferente de la suya debía ser inferior, y esta convicción la ayudaba a detectar en la dama un destello de crueldad ocasional, un desliz pasajero en el candor, en la conversación de una persona que había elevado la amable delicadeza a la altura de arte y cuyo orgullo era demasiado refinado para los modos mezquinos del engaño. En algunos aspectos, su concepción de los motivos humanos parecía haber sido adquirida en la corte de algún reino en decadencia, y en su lista había varios, de los cuales nuestra joven ni siquiera había oído hablar. Estaba claro que había mucho que desconocía y, evidentemente, había cosas en el mundo que era mejor no conocer. En una o dos ocasiones se había sentido realmente asustada, pues así es como la afectaba tener que exclamar, refiriéndose a su amiga: «¡Que Dios la perdone, no me entiende!». Por absurdo que parezca, este descubrimiento la impactaba, la dejaba sintiendo una vaga consternación en la que podía apreciarse incluso un elemento premonitorio. La consternación, naturalmente, se disipaba ante cualquier prueba repentina de la notable inteligencia de madame Merle, pero algo quedaba, como la marca dejada por la marea de la confianza. Madame Merle había declarado una vez su convencimiento de que cuando una amistad cesa de crecer comienza inmediatamente a declinar, sin que exista un punto de equilibrio entre el gustar más o el gustar menos. En otras palabras, un afecto estático era imposible, debía siempre moverse en una dirección o en otra. Sea como fuere, la

muchacha tuvo esos días oportunidades de sobra para dar rienda suelta a su espíritu romántico, más activo que nunca. No me refiero al impulso que sintió al contemplar las pirámides en el transcurso de una excursión desde El Cairo, o al detenerse entre las columnas en ruinas de la Acrópolis y fijar la vista en el punto que le indicaban como el estrecho de Salamina, por más profundas y perdurables que pudieran ser esas emociones. Regresó de Egipto y Grecia a finales de marzo y se instaló de nuevo en Roma. Pocos días después de su llegada, Gilbert Osmond bajó desde Florencia y permaneció tres semanas, durante las cuales el hecho de que Isabel estuviera alojada en la casa de su vieja amiga madame Merle hizo prácticamente inevitable que Osmond la viera todos los días. A finales de abril la joven escribió a la señora Touchett para decirle que en aquel momento estaría encantada de aceptar una invitación hecha mucho tiempo atrás, y se marchó al palazzo Crescentini, y en esta ocasión madame Merle se quedó en Roma. La joven encontró sola a su tía, pues su primo estaba aún en Corfú. Sin embargo, se esperaba su regreso a Florencia en cualquier momento, e Isabel, que no le había visto desde hacía más de un año, se dispuso para ofrecerle la más afectuosa de las bienvenidas.

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No era en él, sin embargo, en quien pensaba mientras esperaba junto a la ventana donde la encontramos hace un rato, y tampoco pensaba en ninguno de los asuntos que hemos descrito someramente. No miraba al pasado, sino al instante más inmediato, inminente. Tenía motivos para esperar una escena, y eso era algo que detestaba. No se preguntaba qué le diría al visitante, pues esta cuestión ya había sido respondida. Lo interesante era qué le diría él a ella. Estaba convencida de que no sería nada agradable y esta certeza se reflejaba claramente en su frente preocupada. Por lo demás, sin embargo, la tranquilidad reinaba en ella. Se había quitado ya el luto y se movía en medio de un radiante esplendor. Simplemente se sentía mayor, a veces mucho y, como si «valiera» más por ello, como una pieza curiosa de una colección de anticuario. En cualquier caso, no tuvo que esperar mucho sumida en su aprehensión, pues un criado apareció al fin ante ella con una tarjeta de visita en una bandeja.

—Haz pasar al caballero —dijo, y siguió mirando por la ventana después de que el criado se retirara. Solo se giró cuando oyó la puerta cerrarse tras la persona que acababa de entrar.

Ante ella estaba plantado Caspar Goodwood, recibido durante un instante, de la cabeza a los pies, por la mirada brillante y seca con que ella retuvo más que ofreció un saludo. Quizá tengamos ahora la oportunidad de comprobar si la madurez del hombre había crecido al ritmo de la de Isabel; entretanto, he de decir que a los ojos críticos de la joven no mostraba la más mínima señal del doloroso paso del tiempo. Erguido, fuerte y recio no había nada en su aspecto que hablara claramente de juventud o de madurez; parecía carecer de inocencia o de debilidad, y por tanto de cualquier filosofía práctica. Su mandíbula mostraba el mismo carácter resuelto que años atrás, pero una crisis como la que atravesaba le añadía naturalmente algo sombrío. Tenía el aspecto de un hombre que había padecido un arduo viaje. Al principio no dijo nada, como si le faltara el aliento. Eso le dio tiempo a Isabel para reflexionar: «Pobre hombre, ¡qué grandes cosas es capaz de hacer y qué pena que malgaste de una forma tan miserable esa espléndida fuerza! ¡Qué lástima también que uno no pueda satisfacer a todo el mundo!». Le dio tiempo incluso a más: a decir al cabo de un minuto:

—¡No se imagina cómo deseaba que no viniera usted!

—No me cabe la menor duda.

Y miró a su alrededor buscando un asiento. No solo había venido, sino que tenía la intención de quedarse.

—Debe de estar muy cansado —dijo Isabel, tomado asiento y pensando, generosamente en su opinión, en darle una oportunidad.

—No, no estoy en absoluto cansado. ¿Alguna vez me ha visto cansado?

—Nunca, ¡ojalá lo hubiera visto alguna vez! ¿Cuándo ha llegado?

—Anoche, muy tarde, en una especie de tren caracol al que llaman expreso. Estos trenes italianos van a la misma velocidad que un cortejo fúnebre en Norteamérica.

—Muy apropiado, debe de haberse sentido como si asistiera a mi entierro.

Y forzó una sonrisa para alentar tranquilidad en aquella difícil situación. Había reflexionado profundamente acerca de la situación, llegando a la certera conclusión de que no había abusado de la buena fe de nadie ni había incumplido trato alguno; pero, pese a todo, temía a su visitante. Se avergonzaba de su temor, aunque agradecía enormemente que no hubiera nada más de lo que avergonzarse. Él la miró con una insistencia dura y rígida, una insistencia carente de todo tacto, sobre todo cuando el oscuro y pesado rayo de su mirada se posó en ella como un peso físico.

—No, no es eso lo que sentí. No puedo pensar en usted como si hubiera muerto. ¡Ojalá pudiera! —dijo con franqueza.

—Se lo agradezco mucho.

—Preferiría pensar en usted muerta antes que casada con otro hombre.

—¡Eso es muy egoísta por su parte! —respondió ella con el ardor de la convicción auténtica—. Aunque usted no sea feliz, otros sí tienen derecho a serlo.

—Es muy probable que sea egoísta, pero no me importa en absoluto que me lo diga. No me importa nada de lo que me pueda decir ahora, no lo puedo sentir. Las cosas más crueles que me pueda decir serían como un mero pinchazo

de alfiler. Después de lo que ha hecho nunca jamás volveré a sentir nada… nada excepto eso. Eso lo sentiré toda mi vida.

El señor Goodwood hizo estas objetivas afirmaciones con seca deliberación, en su lento y duro acento norteamericano que no aportaba colorido ambiental alguno a aquellas frases intrínsicamente crudas. El tono empleado enfadó a Isabel más que conmoverla, lo que quizá fuera una suerte, ya que le dio más motivos para dominarse. Fue bajo la presión de este control como, al poco, su conversación se volvió irrelevante.

—¿Cuándo partió de Nueva York?

Él echó la cabeza atrás, como si calculara.

—Hace diecisiete días.

—Debe de haber viajado deprisa pese a la lentitud de los trenes.

—He venido tan rápido como me ha sido posible. Habría venido cinco días antes si hubiera podido.

—Habría dado igual, señor Goodwood —dijo sonriendo fríamente.

—A usted sí, pero a mí no.

—No veo qué sale ganando.

—¡Eso seré yo quien lo decida!

—Desde luego. A mi modo de ver, lo único que hace es torturarse. —Y entonces, para cambiar de tema, le preguntó si había visto a Henrietta Stackpole. Su expresión indicaba que no había viajado desde Boston hasta Florencia para hablar de Henrietta Stackpole, pero aun así respondió, con claridad suficiente, que había estado con ella justo antes de partir de Norteamérica—. ¿Fue ella a verle? —preguntó Isabel.

—Sí, estaba en Boston y vino a mi despacho. Fue el día en que recibí su carta.

—¿Se lo contó? —preguntó Isabel con cierta inquietud.

—No —respondió simplemente Caspar Goodwood—, no quise hacer eso. No tardará en averiguarlo; se entera de todo.

—Le escribiré una carta y ella me responderá con otra regañándome —declaró Isabel, intentando sonreír de nuevo.

Caspar, sin embargo, se mantuvo serenamente grave.

—Imagino que vendrá en cuanto pueda —dijo.

—¿Solo para regañarme?

—No lo sé. Parecía que no había visto aún todo lo que tenía que ver en Europa.

—Celebro que me lo diga —agradeció Isabel—. Debo prepararme para recibirla.

El señor Goodwood fijó la vista en el suelo un momento y, al fin, levantó los ojos.

—¿Conoce ella al señor Osmond? —preguntó.

—Un poco. Y no le cae bien. Pero desde luego no me caso para satisfacer a Henrietta —añadió. Habría sido mejor para el pobre Caspar que ella hubiese intentado contentar algo más a la señorita Stackpole, pero no dijo nada de eso. Solo preguntó cuándo se celebraría la boda, a lo que ella respondió que todavía no lo sabía—. Solo puedo decir que será pronto. No se lo he dicho a nadie más que a usted y a otra persona, una vieja amiga del señor Osmond.

—¿Cree que sus amigos no aprobarán esta boda? —quiso saber.

—No tengo la menor idea. Como ya le he dicho, no me caso para complacer a mis amigos.

Caspar prosiguió, sin ninguna exclamación, ningún comentario, solo haciendo preguntas sin el menor asomo de delicadeza.

—Entonces, ¿quién y qué es el señor Osmond?

—¿Quién y qué? Nadie y nada, excepto un hombre muy bueno y honorable. No se dedica a los negocios —dijo Isabel—. No es rico, ni se le conoce por nada en particular.

Le desagradaban las preguntas del señor Goodwood, pero se dijo que lo menos que podía hacer por él era satisfacer su curiosidad en la medida de lo posible. No obstante, la satisfacción que mostraba el señor Goodwood no era mucha; la miraba desde su asiento, con la espalda muy recta.

—¿De dónde es? ¿Dónde pertenece?

Su acento nunca le había sonado tan desagradable como al hacer esas preguntas.

—No es de ningún sitio. Ha pasado casi toda su vida en Italia.

—Me dijo en su carta que era norteamericano. ¿No es de un sitio concreto?

—Sí, pero lo ha olvidado. Se marchó siendo muy pequeño.

—¿Nunca ha regresado?

—¿Por qué tendría que regresar? —respondió Isabel poniéndose a la defensiva—. No tiene profesión alguna.

—Podría haber vuelto por placer. ¿No le gusta Estados Unidos?

—No conoce el país. Además, es muy tranquilo y sencillo: se conforma con Italia.

—Con Italia y con usted —dijo el señor Goodwood con franqueza lúgubre y ninguna intención de ser satírico—. ¿Qué es lo que ha hecho? —añadió abruptamente.

—¿Para que me case con él? Nada en absoluto —respondió Isabel, mientras su paciencia se iba tornando en dureza —. ¿Me habría perdonado más fácilmente si hubiese hecho grandes cosas? Renuncie a mí, señor Goodwood. Me caso con alguien sin la menor entidad. No intente interesarse por él. No puede.

—No sabré apreciarle, eso es lo que quiere decirme. Y no es sincera cuando dice que no tiene entidad. Usted piensa que es maravilloso, que es magnífico, aunque nadie más piense lo mismo.

Isabel se ruborizó; sintió que su acompañante había estado muy agudo en su apreciación, y era ciertamente una prueba de cómo la pasión podía aguzar la percepción en alguien que ella nunca había considerado de refinada perspicacia.

—¿Por qué vuelve a insistir en lo que piensan los demás? No puedo hablar con usted de cómo es el señor Osmond.

—Claro que no —respondió Caspar razonablemente. Y permaneció allí sentado con su aire de rígida impotencia, como si no solo esto fuera verdad, sino que tampoco hubiese nada más de lo que pudieran hablar.

—Ya ve qué poco saca en claro —respondió Isabel en consecuencia—, qué poco consuelo o satisfacción puedo darle.

—No esperaba que pudiera darme mucho.

—No entiendo entonces por qué ha venido.

—Vine porque quería verla una vez más, incluso en la situación actual.

—Se lo agradezco, pero si hubiese esperado un poco, seguro que tarde o temprano nos habríamos vuelto a ver, y ese encuentro habría sido más agradable para los dos que este.

—¿Esperado a que se hubiese casado? Eso es precisamente lo que no quería hacer. Usted será distinta después de casarse.

—No mucho. Seguiré siendo una buena amiga suya. Ya lo verá.

—Será peor aún —dijo el señor Goodwood sombríamente.

—¡Desde luego, no hay manera de que se conforme! No puedo prometerle que le detestaré para ayudarle a resignarse.

—¡No me importaría en absoluto si lo hiciera!

Isabel se levantó con un gesto de impaciencia reprimida y se dirigió a la ventana, donde permaneció un momento mirando afuera. Cuando se dio la vuelta, su acompañante seguía inmóvil en su sitio. Se acercó de nuevo a él y se detuvo, apoyando la mano en el respaldo del asiento que acababa de dejar.

—¿Quiere decir que ha venido simplemente para verme? Puede que eso sea mejor para usted que para mí.

—Deseaba escuchar el sonido de su voz —dijo él.

—Ya lo ha oído, y como ve no es demasiado amable.

—Me complace igualmente.

Y tras decir esto se levantó.

Isabel había sentido dolor y disgusto al recibir aquella mañana la noticia de que Caspar estaba en Florencia y de que, si daba su permiso, iría a verla al cabo de una hora. Se había sentido irritada y consternada, aunque había respondido a su mensajero que podía visitarla cuando quisiera. Tampoco se sintió mejor al verle, pues su presencia allí estaba llena de profundas implicaciones. Implicaba cosas que ella no podía tolerar: derechos, reproches, reconvenciones, reprimendas, la esperanza de hacerla cambiar de opinión. Estos sentimientos, aunque implícitos, no habían sido expresados; y ahora nuestra joven, extrañamente, empezaba a lamentar el notable autocontrol de su visitante. Había en él un aire desdichado que la irritaba; el gesto varonil de su mano le hacía latir más deprisa el corazón. Sintió que su agitación crecía y se dijo que su enfado era el de una mujer disgustada por haberse portado mal. Pero ella no se había portado mal, afortunadamente no tenía que tragarse esa amargura, y aun así hubiese preferido que él le recriminara algo. Hubiera deseado que la visita fuera corta, pues no tenía sentido ni era apropiada. Sin embargo, ahora que parecía que él se marchaba, sintió un horror repentino ante la posibilidad de que la dejara sin pronunciar una sola palabra que le brindara la oportunidad de defenderse más de lo que lo había hecho por escrito un mes atrás, con unas pocas palabras cuidadosamente elegidas, al anunciarle su compromiso. Pero si no

había hecho nada malo, ¿por qué habría de querer defenderse? Era un exceso de generosidad por parte de Isabel desear que el señor Goodwood expresara su enfado. Y si hasta entonces él no hubiese requerido de gran esfuerzo para dominarse, ahora debería hacerlo al oír el tono en que ella exclamó repentinamente, como si le acusara de haberla acusado:

—¡Yo no le he engañado! ¡Era completamente libre!

—Sí, lo sé —admitió Caspar.

—Ya le advertí que haría lo que quisiera.

—Dijo que seguramente nunca se casaría, y lo dijo de tal forma que llegué a creerla.

Isabel reflexionó durante un instante.

—Nadie está más sorprendida que yo misma por lo que voy a hacer.

—Me dijo que, si me enteraba de que se había comprometido, no debía creerlo —prosiguió Caspar—. Me enteré hace veinte días por usted misma, pero recordé lo que me había dicho. Pensé que quizá se trataba de un malentendido, y esa es en parte la razón por la que he venido.

—Si quiere que se lo repita de viva voz, lo haré sin falta. No hay ningún malentendido.

—Me di cuenta en cuanto entré en la habitación.

—¿Qué bien le haría que no me casara? —preguntó con cierta agresividad.

—Lo preferiría a esto.

—Es usted muy egoísta, como ya he dicho antes.

—Lo sé. Soy tan egoísta como el hierro.

—¡Incluso el hierro se funde algunas veces! Si se muestra razonable, aceptaré verle de nuevo.

—¿No le parece que ahora estoy siendo razonable?

—No sé qué decirle —respondió ella con humildad repentina.

—No la molestaré mucho tiempo —continuó el joven. Dio un paso hacia la puerta, pero se detuvo—. Otra razón de que haya venido es que quería escuchar qué explicación tenía para haber cambiado de opinión.

—¿Qué explicación? —La humildad desapareció de su voz tan súbitamente como había llegado—. ¿Cree que estoy obligada a explicarme?

Él le dirigió una de sus largas y apagadas miradas.

—Estaba usted muy convencida. Yo la creí.

—Yo también lo creía. No podría explicarlo aunque quisiera.

—Imagino que no. Bien —añadió—, tengo lo que quería. La he visto.

—¡Qué poco ha sacado de tan terribles jornadas de viaje! —se oyó decir Isabel, sintiendo la mísera irrelevancia de su respuesta.

—Si le preocupa que esté destrozado, como parece querer indicar, puede estar tranquila. —Dio media vuelta, esta vez con decisión, y no se dieron la mano ni hubo entre ellos ningún otro gesto de despedida. Cuando llegó a la puerta se detuvo con la mano en el picaporte—. Mañana me marcho de Florencia —dijo sin vacilar.

—¡Estoy encantada de saberlo! —respondió ella con vehemencia.

Cinco minutos después de que se hubiera ido, Isabel estalló en sollozos.

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Su llanto, sin embargo, pronto se apagó, y las señales del mismo habían desaparecido cuando, una hora más tarde, le soltó la noticia a su tía. Utilizo esta expresión porque la joven estaba segura de que a la señora Touchett no le iba a gustar oírlo, y había esperado a decírselo hasta ver al señor Goodwood. Tenía la extraña impresión de que no sería correcto hacerlo público antes de haber escuchado lo que el señor Goodwood tuviera que decir al respecto. Lo que este había dicho era bastante menos de lo que se había esperado, y ahora tenía una irritante sensación de haber perdido el tiempo. Pero no iba a perderlo más; esperó a que la señora Touchett entrara al salón antes del almuerzo y le dijo sin más:

—Tía Lydia, tengo que contarle una cosa.

La señora Touchett dio un pequeño respingo y la miró casi con fiereza.

—No hace falta que me lo digas, ya sé lo que es.

—No entiendo cómo puede saberlo.

—Del mismo modo que sé cuando una ventana está abierta: porque noto la corriente. Vas a casarte con ese hombre.

—¿A qué hombre se refiere? —preguntó Isabel con gran dignidad.

—Al amigo de madame Merle… el señor Osmond.

—No sé por qué le llama el amigo de madame Merle. ¿Es ese el principal rasgo por el que se le conoce?

—Si no es amigo suyo, debería serlo… ¡después de todo lo que ha hecho por él! —exclamó la señora Touchett—. Nunca me habría esperado eso de ella; me siento decepcionada.

—Si quiere decir con eso que madame Merle ha tenido algo que ver en mi compromiso, está completamente equivocada —dijo Isabel con una especie de ardiente frialdad.

—¿Te refieres a que tus encantos han sido suficientes, sin necesidad de echarle el lazo al caballero? Tienes toda la razón. Tus encantos son inmensos, y él nunca se hubiera atrevido a pensar en ti si ella no le hubiera animado. Osmond tiene muy buen concepto de sí mismo, pero no se molesta por nada. Madame Merle se ha tomado la molestia en su lugar.

—¡Él también se ha tomado muchas! —exclamó Isabel con una risa forzada.

—Imagino que, después de todo, sí se habrá esforzado, para conseguir gustarte tanto —asintió con gesto brusco la señora Touchett.

—Pensé que a usted incluso le agradaba.

—Hubo un tiempo en que así era, por eso estoy enfadada con él.

—Enfádese conmigo, no con él —dijo la joven.

—Siempre estoy enfadada contigo, ¡eso no es ningún consuelo! ¿Fue por eso por lo que rechazaste a lord Warburton?

—Por favor, no vuelva otra vez sobre lo mismo. ¿Por qué no habría de gustarme el señor Osmond si a otras también les gusta?

—Pero esas otras no han querido casarse con él ni en un arrebato de locura. Ese hombre no es nada… —explicó la señora Touchett.

—Entonces no podrá herirme —respondió Isabel.

—¿Crees que vas a ser feliz? Deberías saber que nadie es feliz en estos casos.

—Pues entonces seré yo la que instaure la moda. ¿Para qué se casa la gente?

—Solo Dios sabe para qué te casas tú. Por lo general, la gente se casa por lo mismo que se asocia: para fundar una casa. Pero en esta sociedad tú eres la que lo pone todo.

—¿Es porque el señor Osmond no es rico? ¿Es eso a lo que se refiere? —preguntó Isabel.

—No tiene dinero, ni apellido, ni tampoco tiene prestigio. Yo valoro esas cosas y tengo el coraje de decirlo; creo que son muy valiosas. Mucha otra gente piensa lo mismo y lo demuestra, pero ofrecen otras explicaciones.

Isabel titubeó un instante.

—Creo que yo valoro todo aquello que es valioso. Me importa mucho el dinero, y por eso deseo que el señor Osmond disponga de un poco.

—Dáselo entonces, pero cásate con otro.

—Su apellido es lo bastante bueno para mí —continuó la joven—. Y además es muy bonito. ¿Acaso el mío es tan bueno?

—Razón de más para que intentes mejorarlo. Apenas hay una decena de apellidos estadounidenses que merezcan la pena. ¿Te casas con él por caridad?

—Era mi deber decírselo, tía Lydia, pero no creo que sea mi deber darle explicaciones. Incluso si lo fuera, no podría hacerlo. Así que, por favor, no me reconvenga. Hablando de este tema estoy en desventaja, porque yo no puedo hablar.

—No te reconvengo, tan solo te respondo: es mi deber dar alguna muestra de inteligencia y sensatez. Lo vi venir y no dije nada. Nunca me entrometo.

—Nunca lo hace y se lo agradezco enormemente. Ha sido usted muy considerada.

—No fue por consideración, lo hice por conveniencia —dijo la señora Touchett—. Pero voy a hablar con madame Merle.

—No entiendo por qué se empeña en mezclarla en esto. Ha sido muy buena amiga conmigo.

—Es posible, pero conmigo no lo ha sido en absoluto.

—¿Qué es lo que le ha hecho?

—Me ha engañado. Prácticamente me prometió que impediría tu compromiso.

—No habría sido capaz de impedirlo.

—Ella es capaz de cualquier cosa, es lo que siempre me ha gustado de madame Merle. La sabía capaz de desempeñar cualquier papel, pero creí que los interpretaba de uno en uno. No imaginé que interpretaría dos papeles al mismo tiempo.

—No sé qué papel habrá interpretado con usted —dijo Isabel—, eso queda entre ustedes dos. Conmigo se ha mostrado sincera, amable y entregada.

—Entregada, por supuesto, porque quería que te casaras con su candidato. A mí me dijo que solo te vigilaba para poder interponerse.

—Eso se lo dijo para complacerla —respondió Isabel, consciente a pesar de todo de lo poco convincente que resultaba su explicación.

—¿Para complacerme por medio del engaño? Me conoce mejor que todo eso. ¿Acaso me siento complacida hoy?

—No me parece que usted se sienta nunca muy complacida —se vio obligada a responder Isabel—. Si madame Merle sabía que usted acabaría por saber la verdad, ¿qué podía ganar con su insinceridad?

—Ganó tiempo, como puedes ver. Mientras yo esperaba a que ella interfiriera, tú te alejabas desfilando mientras ella iba marcando el paso.

—De acuerdo. Pero según usted misma reconoce, fue consciente de que yo me alejaba y, aunque ella hubiese dado la voz de alarma, usted no habría intentado detenerme.

—Yo no, pero alguien más lo habría hecho.

—¿A quién se refiere? —preguntó Isabel mirando a su tía con mucha dureza.

Los brillantes ojillos de la señora Touchett, tan activos como de costumbre, más que devolvérsela le sostuvieron la mirada.

—¿Habrías hecho caso a Ralph?

—No si se hubiese dedicado a ofender al señor Osmond.

—Ralph no ofende a la gente, lo sabes de sobra. Te tiene muchísimo cariño.

—Lo sé —dijo Isabel—, y ahora lo podré comprobar, porque él sabe que todo cuanto hago lo hago por un motivo.

—Él jamás creyó que fueras a hacer esto. Le dije que serías capaz de hacerlo y él argumentó todo lo contrario.

—Lo hizo porque le gusta discutir —sonrió la joven—. Si a él no le acusa de haberla engañado, ¿por qué acusa entonces a madame Merle?

—Ralph nunca me dio a entender que lo impediría.

—¡Me alegra saberlo! —exclamó alegremente Isabel—. Me gustaría mucho —añadió a continuación— que, cuando llegue, sea usted la primera que le hable de mi compromiso.

—Desde luego que se lo diré —respondió la señora Touchett—. A ti no te voy a decir nada más, pero te advierto

que pienso hablar de ello a otras personas.

—Haga lo que mejor le parezca. Yo únicamente me refería a que me parece mejor que se entere por usted antes que por mí.

—Estoy de acuerdo contigo, ¡es mucho más apropiado!

Tras decir esto, tía y sobrina se fueron a almorzar y la señora Touchett, tal y como había prometido, no volvió a mencionar al señor Osmond. Sin embargo, al cabo de un rato en silencio, le preguntó quién era el que la había visitado hacía una hora.

—Era un viejo amigo, un caballero estadounidense —dijo Isabel sonrojándose.

—Un caballero estadounidense, naturalmente. Solo un caballero de Estados Unidos podría venir de visita a las diez de la mañana.

—Eran las diez y media. Tenía mucha prisa, se marcha esta noche.

—¿No podría haber venido ayer, a la hora normal?

—Es que llegó anoche.

—¿Y solo pasa veinticuatro horas en Florencia? —exclamó la señora Touchett—. Es un verdadero caballero estadounidense.

—Desde luego que lo es —dijo Isabel, pensando con admiración perversa en lo que Caspar Goodwood había hecho por ella.

Ralph llegó dos días después, pero aunque Isabel estaba convencida de que la señora Touchett no había perdido el tiempo en comunicarle la gran noticia, al principio su primo no dio muestras de saber nada del asunto. De lo primero que hablaron fue de su salud, naturalmente. Isabel quería hacerle muchas preguntas acerca de Corfú. El aspecto de Ralph la había conmocionado al verlo entrar en la habitación; ya había olvidado su aire enfermizo. A pesar de su estancia en Corfú, aquel día parecía encontrarse muy mal, y la joven se preguntó si su primo estaría realmente peor o si simplemente ella había perdido la costumbre de vivir con un enfermo. El pobre Ralph no se acercaba ni de lejos a los cánones de la belleza convencional en su recorrido por la vida, y la pérdida completa de salud que ahora padecía no contribuía en absoluto a mitigar la rareza natural de su aspecto. Demacrado y maltrecho, pero aún sensible e irónico, su rostro parecía un desvencijado farol de papel; su fina barba languidecía sobre las mejillas delgadas; la curva desorbitada de su nariz resaltaba con mayor nitidez. Se le veía más flaco que nunca, enjuto, larguirucho y desgarbado, una unión accidental de ángulos descoyuntados. Su chaqueta de terciopelo marrón se había convertido en una prenda perenne; las manos se le habían pegado dentro de los bolsillos; andaba con pesadez, arrastrando los pies y a trompicones, de una forma que delataba una gran indefensión física. Era quizá ese andar errático lo que revelaba mejor que nunca su carácter de enfermo cómico, para quien incluso sus propias debilidades forman parte de la gran broma general. En el caso de Ralph, bien podían haber sido la causa principal de la falta de seriedad con la que veía un mundo en el que le era ya imposible encontrar una razón que explicase la continuidad de su presencia en él. Isabel se había encariñado con su fealdad, y su torpeza había acabado por gustarle. Estas características se habían dulcificado con el trato y le parecían que eran precisamente esas las peculiaridades que daban a Ralph todo su encanto. Era tan encantador que la percepción que Isabel había tenido hasta el momento de su enfermedad había estado acompañada de una especie de consuelo: el estado de su salud no había parecido una limitación, sino un tipo de ventaja intelectual que le liberaba de toda emoción profesional y oficial, y le permitía el lujo de sentir exclusivamente las de índole personal. El resultado era una personalidad deliciosa, una prueba fehaciente de haber vencido la cara más rancia de la enfermedad. Se había visto obligado a reconocer que se encontraba terriblemente mal, aunque en cierto modo había evitado declararse formalmente enfermo. Esta era la impresión que la joven tenía de su primo, y si había sentido lástima de él había sido únicamente producto de la reflexión. Y como reflexionaba tanto, se había permitido sentir cierta compasión hacia él, aunque siempre había temido malgastar aquella esencia, aquel artículo tan preciado, que tiene más valor para quien lo ofrece que para cualquier otro. En ese momento, sin embargo, no hacía falta tener una gran sensibilidad para comprender que el hilo que sostenía la vida del pobre Ralph era menos elástico de lo que debiera. Ralph era un espíritu brillante, libre y generoso, tenía toda la iluminación de la sabiduría y nada de su pedantería, y a pesar de todo, para horror suyo, se estaba muriendo.

Isabel observó de nuevo que la vida era ciertamente difícil para algunas personas, y sintió una ligera oleada de vergüenza al pensar lo fácil que ahora prometía ser para ella. Estaba dispuesta a admitir que Ralph no se mostrase complacido con su compromiso, pero a lo que no estaba dispuesta, pese al afecto que hacia él sentía, era a permitir que ese hecho estropease la situación. Ni siquiera estaba dispuesta, o así lo pensaba, a enfadarse porque no sintiese

ninguna simpatía hacia sus planes, pues sería privilegio suyo (sería, de hecho, su inclinación natural) no mostrarse de acuerdo con ningún paso que ella diese hacia el matrimonio. Un primo siempre parece odiar al marido de su prima; eso es algo tradicional, clásico, forma parte de esa creencia generalizada de que el primo parece siempre adorar a la prima. Ralph era ante todo crítico y, aunque a ella, aparte de otras consideraciones, le habría agradado casarse para complacer tanto a él como a los demás, habría sido absurdo conceder importancia a que su elección coincidiera con la opinión de su primo. ¿Cuál era esa opinión después de todo? Había dado a entender que prefería que se casara con lord Warburton, pero eso solo lo había hecho porque ella había rechazado a aquel hombre excelente. Si lo hubiese aceptado, estaba claro que la actitud de Ralph habría sido distinta; él siempre llevaba la contraria. Cualquier matrimonio se podía criticar; era parte de la esencia del matrimonio ser susceptible a la crítica. ¡Lo bien que podría ella, si se lo planteara, criticar aquella unión suya! Pero tenía otras cosas en las que pensar, y estaría encantada de que fuese Ralph quien se encargase de esa tarea en su lugar. Isabel estaba dispuesta a ser lo más paciente e indulgente posible. Su primo tenía que haberse dado cuenta, y por eso resultaba aún más extraño que no dijese nada. Transcurridos tres días sin que Ralph hablase, nuestra joven se cansó de esperar; por mucho que le disgustase, su primo debía al menos cumplir con las formas. Nosotros, que sabemos más del pobre Ralph que su prima, podemos creer sin dificultad que durante las horas que siguieron a su llegada al palazzo Crescentini ya había sopesado en privado las más diversas formas para afrontar aquello. Su madre le había recibido literalmente con la gran noticia, lo cual le produjo incluso más escalofríos que el maternal beso de la señora Touchett. Ralph se sintió horrorizado y humillado: sus cálculos habían sido erróneos y había perdido a la persona que más le importaba en el mundo. Deambulaba por la casa a la deriva, como una nave sin timón en medio de un torrente salpicado de rocas, o bien se sentaba en el jardín del palacio en una gran butaca de mimbre, con las largas piernas estiradas, la cabeza echada hacia atrás y el sombrero cubriéndole los ojos. Sentía el corazón helado; jamás había detestado algo tanto. ¿Qué podía hacer, qué podía decir? Si no podía reclamar a su prima, ¿podía fingir que se alegraba? Tratar de recuperarla solo era admisible si el intento podía tener éxito. Intentar convencerla de que había algo sórdido o siniestro en el hombre ante cuyas profundas artes había sucumbido solo sería aceptablemente discreto en caso de que ella se dejase convencer. En caso contrario, Ralph habría firmado su propia condena. Le costaba el mismo esfuerzo expresar sus pensamientos que ocultarlos; no podía ni asentir con sinceridad ni protestar con esperanza. Mientras tanto, sabía (o más bien suponía) que la pareja de prometidos renovaba a diario sus votos mutuos. Osmond se dejaba ver poco en aquellos momentos por el palazzo Crescentini, pero Isabel se reunía con él todos los días en otros lugares, como era libre de hacer una vez que su compromiso se hubo hecho público. Había alquilado un carruaje por meses, para no sentirse en deuda con su tía por los medios necesarios para lograr un fin que la señora Touchett desaprobaba, y por las mañanas iba en él al Cascine. A primera hora del día, aquel exuberante parque de las afueras estaba libre de intrusos y nuestra joven, que se reunía con su enamorado en la parte más tranquila, paseaba con él un rato bajo la grisácea sombra italiana y escuchaba a los ruiseñores.

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Una mañana, a la vuelta de su paseo, una media hora antes del almuerzo, Isabel bajó del vehículo en el patio del palacio y, en lugar de subir por la majestuosa escalinata, cruzó el patio, pasó por debajo de un arco y entró al jardín. En ese momento era el lugar más delicioso que pudiera imaginarse. Sumido en la quietud del mediodía, la sombra cálida, envolvente y en calma convertía los cenadores en espaciosas cuevas. Ralph estaba allí sentado en la penumbra clara, a los pies de la estatua de Terpsícore, ninfa danzante con crótalos en los dedos y velos flotantes a la manera de Bernini. La relajación extrema de la figura de su primo hizo pensar al principio a Isabel que estaba dormido. Su paso ligero sobre la hierba no le había despertado y, antes de marcharse, la joven se detuvo un instante a contemplarlo. En ese momento Ralph abrió los ojos, e Isabel se sentó en un rústico asiento a juego con el que ocupaba su primo. Aunque en su enfado le había acusado de indiferencia, no estaba tan ciega para no ver que había algo que atormentaba a Ralph. Isabel había justificado su aire ausente en parte por la abulia que le provocaba una debilidad cada vez mayor, en parte por las preocupaciones relacionadas con la propiedad heredada de su padre, fruto de unas excéntricas operaciones que la señora Touchett desaprobaba y que, como le había dicho a Isabel, ahora encontraban también la oposición de los otros socios del banco. Tendría que haberse ido a Inglaterra, le decía su madre, en lugar de a Florencia. Hacía muchos meses que no iba por allí, y mostraba el mismo interés por los asuntos bancarios que por la situación de la Patagonia.

—Siento haberte despertado —dijo Isabel—; pareces muy cansado.

—Me encuentro muy cansado. Pero no estaba dormido. Estaba pensando en ti.

—¿Y eso te cansa?

—No te puedes imaginar hasta qué punto. No lleva a ninguna parte. El camino es largo y no llego jamás.

—¿Adónde te gustaría llegar? —le preguntó mientras cerraba la sombrilla.

—A poder expresarme apropiadamente lo que pienso de tu compromiso.

—No pienses demasiado en eso —le respondió con suavidad.

—¿Quieres decir que no es asunto mío?

—Llegado a cierto punto, no lo es.

—Ese es el punto que quiero precisar. Imagino que habrás pensado que me estaba portando como un maleducado. No te he felicitado todavía.

—Claro que me he dado cuenta. Me preguntaba por qué guardabas silencio.

—Por muchas razones. Te lo voy a explicar —dijo Ralph. Se quitó el sombrero y lo dejó en el suelo. Después se sentó frente a ella, mirándola. Se echó hacia atrás bajo la protección de Bernini, con la cabeza apoyada en su pedestal del mármol, los brazos caídos a los lados y las manos apoyadas en los brazos de su amplia butaca. Se le veía raro, incómodo. Estuvo vacilando un buen rato. Isabel no dijo nada: cuando veía a alguien incómodo solía sentir lástima, pero estaba decidida a no ayudar a Ralph a decir una sola palabra que no respetase su gran decisión—. Creo que a duras penas me he recuperado de la sorpresa —continuó al fin—. Eres la persona de quien menos esperaba que se dejara atrapar.

—No sé por qué lo llamas dejarse atrapar.

—Porque te van a meter en una jaula.

—Si me gusta mi jaula, eso no tiene por qué preocuparte —respondió ella.

—Eso es lo que me pregunto, y en lo que he estado pensando.

—Si tú lo has estado pensando, ¡puedes imaginar cuánto lo he pensado yo! Me siento satisfecha de lo que estoy haciendo.

—Pues mucho debes de haber cambiado. Hace un año valorabas tu libertad por encima de cualquier cosa. Lo único que deseabas era contemplar la vida.

—Ya la he visto —dijo Isabel—. Y reconozco que ahora no me parece una ocupación tan atractiva.

—No pretendo que lo sea; solo que tenía la idea de que mantenías una opinión positiva sobre ella y de que querías explorar todas sus posibilidades.

—He comprobado que no se puede abarcar algo tan amplio. Hay que escoger un rincón y cultivarlo.

—Eso es lo que yo pienso. Y hay que elegir el mejor rincón posible. Durante el invierno, mientras leía tus deliciosas cartas, no tenía ni idea de que estuvieras tomando una decisión. No dijiste nada al respecto y tu silencio me hizo bajar la guardia.

—No se trataba de algo que te pudiera contar por carta. Además, no sabía nada del futuro. Todo esto ha sucedido después. Pero, de haber estado en guardia, ¿qué habrías hecho? —preguntó Isabel.

—Te habría dicho: «Espera un poco más».

—¿Esperar a qué?

—Bueno, a tener un poco más de luz —dijo Ralph con una sonrisa un tanto absurda, mientras metía las manos en los bolsillos.

—¿Y de dónde habría llegado esa luz… de ti?

—Podría haber hecho saltar una o dos chispas.

Isabel se había quitado los guantes y, tras colocarlos sobre la rodilla, los alisó. La delicadeza de aquel gesto era accidental, pues la expresión de su rostro no era conciliadora.

—Estás dando palos de ciego, Ralph. Te gustaría decir que no te agrada el señor Osmond, lo que pasa es que te da miedo hacerlo.

—¿«Dispuesto a herir pero temeroso de atacar»? A él estoy dispuesto a herirle, sí, pero a ti no. Te temo a ti, no a él. Si te casas con él, no me favorecerá haber hablado así.

—¡Si me caso con él! ¿Acaso tenías alguna esperanza de poder disuadirme?

—Está claro que eso te parece demasiado fatuo.

—No —respondió Isabel tras una breve pausa—, me parece demasiado conmovedor.

—Es lo mismo. Me hace parecer tan ridículo que sientes pena por mí.

Isabel volvió a acariciar los largos guantes.

—Sé que me tienes mucho afecto, de eso no me puedo librar.

—Ni lo intentes, por lo que más quieras. No lo olvides jamás, así te convencerás de hasta qué punto deseo que te vaya bien.

—¡Y de lo poco que confías en mí!

Hubo un silencio momentáneo. El cálido mediodía parecía escuchar expectante.

—Confío en ti, pero no en él —dijo Ralph.

—Ya lo has dicho, y me alegro de que hayas sido tan claro. Pero lo lamentarás —dijo Isabel levantando los ojos y dirigiéndole una mirada amplia y profunda.

—No si tú eres justa.

—Yo soy muy justa —dijo Isabel—. ¿Qué mejor prueba de ello que el no estar enfadada contigo? No sé lo que me ocurre, pero no lo estoy. Lo estaba cuando has empezado, pero se me ha pasado. Tal vez debería estar furiosa, pero el señor Osmond no sería de la misma opinión. Él quiere que yo lo sepa todo, y por eso me gusta. Tú no tienes nada que ganar, ya lo sé. Nunca he sido tan buena contigo, de muchacha, como para que quieras que siga siéndolo. Das muy buenos consejos, lo has hecho a menudo. No, estoy muy tranquila; siempre he creído en tu buen juicio —continuó presumiendo de su tranquilidad y hablando al mismo tiempo con una especie de exaltación contenida. Era aquel deseo apasionado de ser justa lo que conmovía el corazón de Ralph y le producía el mismo efecto que la caricia de un animalillo al que hubiese lastimado. Quería interrumpir su discurso y tranquilizarla. Por un momento fue presa de una absurda incoherencia y se habría retractado de lo que había dicho. Pero ella no le concedió oportunidad alguna. Siguió adelante tras haber vislumbrado, en su opinión, cuál era la línea heroica que debía seguir y deseosa de avanzar en esa dirección—. Veo que tienes una idea rondándote la cabeza y me gustaría mucho escucharla. Estoy segura de que es desinteresada. Parece un tema extraño para discutir sobre ello, y, por supuesto, debo decirte que si esperas disuadirme ya puedes desistir. No cederé lo más mínimo, es demasiado tarde. Como bien dices, estoy atrapada. Desde luego, no te será agradable recordar esto, pero no tendrás más dolor que el de tus propios pensamientos. Nunca te lo echaré en cara.

—Estoy seguro de que nunca lo harás —dijo Ralph—. Es que no es en absoluto la clase de boda que había imaginado para ti.

—¿Y qué clase de boda habías imaginado, si se puede saber?

—Bueno, es difícil de explicar. No tenía exactamente un punto de vista positivo, era más bien negativo. No

esperaba que te decidieras por… en fin, por esa clase de persona.

—¿Y qué problema hay con la clase de persona que es el señor Osmond, si es que hay alguno? El que sea tan independiente, tan particular, eso es lo que más aprecio en él —respondió la joven—. ¿Qué sabes en su contra? Apenas le conoces.

—Es cierto —dijo Ralph—, lo conozco muy poco, y confieso que carezco de datos y hechos que puedan demostrar que es un villano. Pero aun así, no puedo dejar de pensar que corres un riesgo muy grande.

—El matrimonio siempre es un gran riesgo, y él lo corre igual que yo.

—¡Eso es problema suyo! Si tiene miedo, que se eche atrás. Ojalá lo hiciese.

Isabel se reclinó en el asiento, cruzó los brazos y miró un rato a su primo.

—Creo que no te entiendo —dijo al fin con frialdad—. No sé de qué estás hablando.

—Creí que te casarías con un hombre de más importancia.

Isabel había hablado con frialdad, como he dicho, pero al escuchar a su primo una llamarada de color le encendió las mejillas.

—¿Más importante para quién? Me parece suficiente con que mi marido sea importante para mí.

Ralph también se ruborizó, avergonzado de su propia actitud. Para tratar de remediarlo, empezó por adoptar un cambio físico de postura: se enderezó y se inclinó hacia delante, apoyando las manos en las rodillas. Fijó la vista en el suelo y mantuvo un aire de la más respetuosa deliberación.

—Dentro de un momento te explicaré a qué me refiero —dijo al fin.

Se sentía agitado, presa de una intensa vehemencia. Ahora que había iniciado la discusión necesitaba expresar del todo lo que rondaba por su cabeza, aunque también quería ser gentil en extremo.

Isabel esperó un poco y luego volvió a hablar con gran dignidad:

—El señor Osmond ocupa un lugar preeminente en todos esos aspectos que hacen que se aprecie a una persona. Puede que existan naturalezas más nobles, pero nunca he tenido el placer de conocerlas. La del señor Osmond es la mejor que conozco, es lo suficientemente bueno, interesante e inteligente para mí. Estoy mucho más impresionada por lo que tiene y representa que por aquello de lo que pueda carecer.

—Yo me había forjado una visión encantadora de tu futuro —observó Ralph sin responder a las palabras de Isabel —. Me había entretenido planeando un alto destino para ti, y en mis planes no entraba nada de esto. No descender tan fácilmente ni tan pronto.

—¿Descender, dices?

—Bueno, así entiendo lo que te ha pasado. Me parecía que te elevabas en el azul… que volabas en la luz brillante por encima de las cabezas de los hombres. De repente alguien te lanza un capullo marchito, un proyectil que jamás debió alcanzarte, y caes en picado al suelo. Me duele —dijo Ralph audazmente—, ¡me duele como si fuera yo quien se hubiese caído!

—No te entiendo en absoluto —repitió Isabel con una expresión cada vez más dolorida y desconcertada—. Dices que te entretenías forjando proyectos acerca de mi trayectoria… no lo entiendo. No te entretengas demasiado, o pensaré que estás divirtiéndote a mi costa.

—No temo que no creas que albergaba grandes planes para ti —dijo Ralph negando con la cabeza.

—¿A qué te refieres con eso de que me elevaba y volaba?—insistió ella—. Nunca me he movido en un plano más elevado que en el que ahora me muevo. No hay nada más elevado para una muchacha que casarse con alguien que… con la persona que le gusta —dijo la pobre Isabel, perdiéndose en la explicación didáctica.

—Es el hecho de que te guste la persona de la que estamos hablando lo que me atrevo a criticar, querida prima. Tenía que haber dicho que el hombre apropiado para ti debería ser de una naturaleza más activa, de mayor amplitud de miras, más libre. —Tras un ligero titubeo, Ralph continuó—: No puedo librarme de la sensación de que Osmond es, de algún modo… bueno, poca cosa

Había pronunciado estas palabras con poca convicción; temía que Isabel volviese a encenderse. Pero, para su sorpresa, su prima permaneció callada, con aire de estar sopesando aquello.

—¿Poca cosa? —dijo, dando a las palabras una inmensa sonoridad.

—Creo que es estrecho de miras y egoísta. ¡Se toma a sí mismo tan en serio!

—Tiene un gran respeto por sí mismo, y no seré yo quien le censuré por ello —dijo Isabel—. Es la mejor manera de asegurar el respeto hacia los demás.

Por un momento Ralph se sintió casi tranquilo ante el tono razonable de su prima.

—Sí, pero todo es relativo. Uno debe sentir la relación que establece con las cosas… con los demás. Y no creo que el señor Osmond haga eso.

—A mí lo que me interesa, ante todo, es su relación conmigo, y en eso es excelente.

—Es la encarnación del buen gusto —continuó Ralph, pensando a conciencia la mejor forma de definir los siniestros atributos del señor Osmond sin quedar en mal lugar por describirlo de una manera que pudiese parecer grosera. Quería describirle desde una perspectiva impersonal, científica—. Juzga y mide, aprueba y condena, utilizando ese buen gusto por todo rasero.

—Entonces es de celebrar que su gusto sea exquisito.

—Es exquisito, sin duda, ya que le ha llevado a elegirte a ti por esposa. Pero ¿has visto alguna vez a alguien de un gusto así, realmente exquisito, contrariado?

—Espero tener la fortuna de no dejar de complacer nunca a mi marido.

Al oír esas palabras, Ralph no pudo impedir que una pasión repentina se adueñase de sus labios y le hiciese exclamar:

—¡Ah! ¡Eso es pura testarudez, es indigno de ti! Tú no has nacido para que te midan con semejante rasero, has nacido para algo mejor que salvaguardar la sensibilidad de un diletante estéril.

Isabel se levantó como movida por un resorte y él hizo lo mismo. Se quedaron frente a frente un rato, mirándose como si Ralph hubiera lanzado un desafío o un insulto. Pero la joven se limitó a musitar:

—Has ido demasiado lejos.

—He dicho lo que pensaba… ¡y lo he dicho porque te amo!

Isabel empalideció: ¿debía añadir también a Ralph a aquella lista exasperante? Sintió un súbito deseo de tacharlo de ella.

—¡Pero entonces no hablas de manera desinteresada!

—Te amo, pero sin esperanza alguna —dijo su primo rápidamente, forzando una sonrisa y sintiendo que en esta última declaración había expresado más de lo que pretendía.

Isabel se alejó y permaneció contemplando la soleada quietud del jardín. Al cabo de un momento se acercó de nuevo.

—¡Entonces me temo que tus palabras sean fruto de la desesperación! No lo comprendo, pero no importa. No quiero discutir contigo, me resulta imposible hacerlo. He tratado tan solo de escucharte. Te agradezco que hayas intentado explicarte —dijo con delicadeza, como si la furia que la acababa de levantar del asiento ya se hubiera apagado—. Eres muy bueno al intentar prevenirme, si es que de verdad estás preocupado. Pero no prometo pensar en lo que me has dicho: lo olvidaré cuanto antes. Intenta olvidarlo tú también. Has cumplido con tu deber y ningún hombre puede hacer más. No puedo explicarte lo que siento, lo que creo, y aunque pudiese no lo haría. —Hizo una pequeña pausa, y luego continuó de una forma tan inconsecuente que, pese a estar dominado por el anhelo de descubrir la más mínima concesión, a Ralph no le pasó por alto—. No puedo entrar a discutir la idea que tienes del señor Osmond, no puedo tenerla en consideración porque yo lo veo de una forma completamente distinta. No es un hombre importante… no, no es importante; es un hombre al que la importancia resulta completamente indiferente. Si es eso a lo que te refieres cuando le llamas «poca cosa», entonces sí, será todo lo insignificante que quieras. Yo a eso lo llamo ser grande, es lo más grande que conozco. No pienso discutir contigo por la persona con la que me voy a casar —repitió Isabel—. No tengo el menor interés en defender al señor Osmond; él no es tan débil como para necesitar mi defensa. Imagino que te parecerá extraño incluso a ti que hable de él con tanta tranquilidad y frialdad, como si se tratara de cualquier otra persona. No hablaría de él con nadie más que contigo; y tú, después de lo que has dicho… tal vez sea mejor que te conteste de una vez por todas. Dime, ¿querrías que me comprometiera en un matrimonio mercenario, en lo que se conoce como matrimonio de conveniencia? Yo solo tengo una ambición: ser libre para perseguir un sentimiento bueno. Alguna vez tuve otras, pero ya se han esfumado. ¿Te quejas de que el señor Osmond no sea rico? Eso es precisamente lo que me gusta de él. Por fortuna yo tengo dinero suficiente, y nunca me he sentido tan agradecida por tenerlo como hoy. Hay veces en las que me gustaría arrodillarme ante la tumba de tu padre: probablemente consiguió algo mejor de lo que pensaba al poner a mi alcance la posibilidad de casarme con un hombre pobre, un hombre que lleva su pobreza con tanta dignidad, con tanta indiferencia. El señor Osmond nunca ha querido trepar ni luchar; no le ha interesado conseguir ningún bien material. Si eso es ser limitado, ser egoísta, tanto mejor. No me asustan semejantes palabras, ni siquiera me disgustan; solo lamento que te hayas equivocado. Otros se pueden equivocar, pero me sorprende que lo hagas tú. Deberías reconocer a un caballero

cuando lo tienes delante, deberías saber apreciar una mente cultivada. ¡El señor Osmond no comete errores! Lo sabe todo, lo entiende todo, tiene el espíritu más generoso, más gentil y más elevado. Te has formado una idea falsa. Es una lástima, pero no puedo hacer nada por remediarlo. Tiene que ver más contigo que conmigo. —Isabel hizo una pausa, mirando a su primo con los ojos encendidos por un sentimiento que contradecía la cuidadosa calma de su actitud. Era un sentimiento complejo al que contribuían en igual medida el furioso dolor que le habían causado las palabras de su primo y sentirse herida en su orgullo al tener que justificar una elección que a sus propios ojos era tan solo noble y pura. Aunque permaneció callada, Ralph no dijo nada, porque comprendió que tenía algo más que decir. Parecía triunfal y enormemente solícita a la vez, indiferente pero llena de pasión—. ¿Con qué clase de persona habrías preferido que me casara? —preguntó la joven de improviso—. Hablas de alzar el vuelo y planear, pero cuando una persona se casa toca la tierra. Toda persona tiene sentimientos y necesidades humanas, tiene un corazón dentro del pecho, y debe casarse con un individuo concreto. Tu madre nunca me ha perdonado que no llegase a mejor entendimiento con lord Warburton y está horrorizada de que me conforme con alguien que no cuenta con ninguna de sus grandes ventajas: no tiene propiedades, ni títulos nobiliarios, ni casas, ni tierras, ni posición, ni reputación, ni brillantes posesiones de ningún tipo. Es la total ausencia de todas esas cosas lo que a mí me agrada. El señor Osmond es sencillamente un hombre muy solitario, muy cultivado y muy sincero… no es ningún insigne terrateniente.

Ralph había escuchado con gran atención, como si cada cosa que dijera Isabel mereciera la más profunda reflexión. Pero en realidad solo escuchaba a medias lo que ella le decía, pues al mismo tiempo intentaba encajarlo con la impresión general que le producía: la impresión de la ferviente buena fe de su prima. Isabel estaba equivocada, pero tenía fe; se estaba engañando, pero no dejaba de tener coherencia. Era muy propio de ella que, tras haberse inventado una bella teoría acerca de Gilbert Osmond, le amara no por lo que poseía en realidad, sino por sus propias carencias que ella transformaba en honores. Ralph recordó lo que le había dicho a su padre acerca de poner al alcance de Isabel la posibilidad de hacer realidad los deseos de su imaginación. El anciano lo hizo y la joven había aprovechado ese lujo al máximo. El pobre Ralph se sentía enfermo y avergonzado. Isabel había pronunciado sus últimas palabras con una solemnidad y una convicción que zanjaban prácticamente la discusión y la terminó formalmente dándose la vuelta y dirigiéndose a la casa. Ralph la acompañó, entraron juntos al patio y llegaron a la gran escalinata. En este punto se detuvo e Isabel se volvió hacia él con expresión de júbilo, de absoluta y perversa gratitud. La oposición de su primo la había ayudado a entender con mayor claridad el concepto que ella tenía de su propia conducta.

—¿No vienes a almorzar? —preguntó Isabel.

—No, no quiero almorzar. No tengo hambre.

—Tienes que comer —dijo la joven—. Vives del aire.

—Pues sí, bastante, y me vuelvo al jardín a tomar otro bocado. He venido hasta aquí solo para decirte esto. El año pasado te dije que si te metías en problemas me sentiría terriblemente decepcionado. Así es como me siento hoy.

—¿Crees que estoy metida en problemas?

—Una persona está metida en problemas cuando se equivoca.

—Muy bien —dijo Isabel—; jamás acudiré a ti para lamentarme de mis problemas.

Y comenzó a subir las escaleras.

Ralph, de pie con las manos en los bolsillos, la siguió con la mirada; luego, el frescor agazapado en el patio de altos muros le golpeó, provocándole un escalofrío, de modo que regresó al jardín para alimentarse del sol florentino.

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Mientras paseaba con su prometido por el Cascine, Isabel no sintió el menor impulso de explicarle la poca aprobación de que era objeto en el palazzo Crescentini. La discreta oposición que mostraban su tía y su primo ante la boda no la afectaba demasiado en general; lo que se desprendía de esta oposición era simplemente que Gilbert Osmond no les gustaba. Isabel no sentía este rechazo como algo alarmante, apenas lo lamentaba, ya que le servía principalmente para dejar más claro el hecho, tan honorable desde cualquier punto de vista, de que se casaba para complacerse a sí misma. Se puede hacer otro tipo de cosas para complacer a los demás, pero esto se hacía para lograr una satisfacción más personal, y la de Isabel quedaba confirmada por la conducta intachable, digna de admiración, de su prometido. Gilbert Osmond estaba enamorado, y nunca había merecido menos las severas críticas lanzadas por Ralph Touchett que durante aquellos días tranquilos y radiantes, únicos e irrepetibles, que precedieron a la culminación de sus esperanzas. La impresión más importante que estas críticas habían producido en el ánimo de Isabel era que la pasión del amor separaba terriblemente a su víctima de todos salvo del objeto amado. Se sentía desconectada de todas las personas que habían formado parte de su vida: de sus dos hermanas, que le escribieron para expresarle el consabido deseo de que fuera feliz y su sorpresa, de algún modo más vaga, por no haber escogido un consorte que fuese el héroe de un más rico anecdotario; de Henrietta, que seguramente se presentaría allí demasiado tarde con el propósito de reconvenirla; de lord Warburton, que probablemente acabaría por consolarse; y de Caspar Goodwood, que tal vez no se consolase jamás; de su tía, que tenía unas ideas frías y superficiales acerca del matrimonio, por el que a su vez sentía un desprecio que no se molestaba en ocultar; y de Ralph, cuyas palabras acerca de que tenía grandes esperanzas para ella no eran sino una extravagante excusa para ocultar su decepción personal. Al parecer Ralph no quería que se casara nunca (eso era lo que en realidad quería decir), porque se divertía con el espectáculo de sus aventuras de mujer soltera. Su decepción le hacía decir cosas desagradables del hombre que Isabel había preferido incluso a él: Isabel se complacía pensando en que Ralph se había enfadado. Era más sencillo para ella creer esto porque, como digo, ahora tenía pocas emociones libres u ociosas para emplearlas en cuestiones menores, y aceptaba como un accidente, de hecho casi como un ornamento, del destino la idea de que preferir a Gilbert Osmond como ella lo hacía suponía por fuerza romper con todos los demás lazos. Isabel saboreaba la dulzura de esta preferencia, dulzura que la hacía consciente, casi con admiración, del flujo envidioso e implacable de esa condición de embrujo y posesión, grande como el honor y la virtud que se atribuyen tradicionalmente al estar enamorado. Era el lado trágico de la felicidad: la alegría de uno siempre está hecha de la infelicidad de otro.

La euforia del éxito, que sin duda ardía ahora en el espíritu de Osmond, dejaba escapar muy poco humo para ser una hoguera tan brillante. La alegría en él no se manifestaba de forma vulgar; la emoción, en el más contenido de los hombres, era una especie de éxtasis de autocontrol. Esta disposición, sin embargo, le convertía en un amante admirable, pues le daba una visión constante de ese estado de encantamiento y devoción. Nunca se olvidaba de sí mismo, como he dicho, y así nunca se olvidaba de ser amable y tierno, de cubrirse con la apariencia (lo que no le suponía desde luego ninguna dificultad) de mantener alerta los sentimientos y albergar intenciones profundas. Su joven dama le complacía inmensamente; madame Merle le había hecho un regalo de incalculable valor. ¿Con quién se podía vivir mejor que con un espíritu noble con inclinación a la ternura? ¿Acaso no iba a ser toda esa dulzura para él, mientras que los aspectos más fatigosos irían destinados a la sociedad, que sentía tanta admiración por los aires de superioridad? ¿Qué mejor don podía poseer una compañera que una mente rápida e imaginativa que le evitaba tener que repetir las cosas y reflejaba sus pensamientos en una superficie pulida y elegante? Osmond odiaba ver sus opiniones reproducidas literalmente, pues le hacía parecer rancio y estúpido; prefería que se renovaran al ser reproducidas, como la música renueva las palabras. Su egocentrismo nunca había adoptado la forma tosca de desear una esposa aburrida; la inteligencia de aquella dama sería bandeja de plata, no de barro: una bandeja en la que poder apilar montones de frutos maduros, a los que añadiría un valor decorativo, de modo que la conversación se convertiría para él en una especie de postre. Descubrió esta perfecta cualidad de plata en Isabel; él podía llamar con los nudillos a la puerta de su imaginación y hacerla vibrar. Sabía perfectamente, aunque nadie se lo hubiese dicho, que aquella unión gozaba de poco favor entre los familiares de la joven. De todos modos, la había tratado tanto como

a una persona independiente que apenas parecía necesario lamentarse por la actitud de su familia. Sin embargo, una mañana hizo una brusca alusión al respecto.

—Es la diferencia de fortuna lo que les disgusta —dijo—. Piensan que estoy enamorado de tu dinero.

—¿Hablas de mi tía… de mi primo? —preguntó Isabel—. ¿Cómo puedes saber lo que piensan?

—Tú no me has dicho que se sientan complacidos y la carta que le escribí el otro día a la señora Touchett ni siquiera ha merecido respuesta. Si hubieran estado encantados ya me habrían dado alguna muestra, y el hecho de que yo sea pobre y tú rica es la explicación más lógica a sus reservas. Naturalmente, cuando un hombre pobre se casa con una mujer rica debe prepararse para toda clase de acusaciones. A mí no me importan; solo me preocupa una cosa: que tú no tengas ninguna sombra de duda. No me importa lo que piense la gente de la que no espero nada, quizá ni siquiera sea capaz de querer saberlo. Nunca me han interesado esas cosas, que Dios me perdone, y no veo por qué tendría que empezar a interesarme ahora, cuando tengo algo mejor que lo compensa todo. No voy a fingir que lamente que seas rica, estoy encantado. Me encanta todo lo que es tuyo, ya sea dinero o virtud. El dinero es algo horrible cuando se va tras él, pero es maravilloso cuando se encuentra. Sin embargo, me parece que ya han quedado sobradamente demostrados los límites de mi inquietud en ese sentido: no he intentado en toda mi vida ganar un solo penique y debería estar más libre de sospecha que la mayoría de esa gente a la que se ve escarbando y rebuscando. Imagino que es su deber sospechar… el de tu familia; en términos generales, es lo que deben hacer. Algún día les gustaré más, y a ti también, en lo que a eso se refiere. Mientras tanto, mi deber es no hacerme mala sangre y simplemente mostrarme agradecido a la vida y al amor.

En otra ocasión Osmond había dicho:

—Amarte me ha hecho mejor persona. Me ha hecho más sabio y más complaciente y, no lo voy a negar, más inteligente, más agradable e incluso más fuerte. Antes quería muchas cosas y me enfadaba por no tenerlas. En teoría estaba satisfecho, como ya te dije una vez. Me halagaba a mí mismo diciéndome que había conseguido limitar mis deseos. Pero me dominaba la irritación, solía tener ataques morbosos, estériles y odiosos de avidez, de deseo. Ahora estoy realmente satisfecho porque no puedo imaginar nada mejor. Es como cuando intentas leer un libro a la luz del crepúsculo y de pronto se enciende una lámpara. Había estado dejándome los ojos en el libro de la vida sin encontrar nada que recompensara mis esfuerzos, pero, ahora que lo puedo leer como es debido, compruebo que es una historia encantadora. Mi querida niña, no puedo expresarte cómo la vida parece extenderse ante nosotros, qué larga tarde de verano nos aguarda. Es el declinar de un día italiano, con un brillo dorado y las sombras que se alargan, y esa delicadeza divina en la luz, el aire, el paisaje que he amado toda la vida y que hoy amas tú. Te juro por mi honor que no veo razón alguna que nos impida seguir adelante. Tenemos cuanto nos gusta, por no hablar de que nos tenemos el uno al otro. Tenemos la capacidad de admirar y varias convicciones fundamentales. No somos estúpidos, no somos mezquinos, no estamos sujetos a ninguna clase de ignorancia ni de pesar. Tú eres extraordinariamente fresca, y yo extraordinariamente maduro. Tenemos a mi pobre hija para deleitarnos; intentaremos ayudarla para que tenga una buena vida. Todo es dulce y suave… tiene el colorido italiano.

Hicieron muchos planes, pero al mismo tiempo dejaron mucho espacio para la libertad. Dieron por hecho, no obstante, que por el momento vivirían en Italia. Era en Italia donde se habían conocido, Italia había formado parte de las primeras impresiones que se habían causado mutuamente e Italia debía participar también de su felicidad. Osmond se sentía apegado al país por todo el tiempo que llevaba allí e Isabel sentía el estímulo de lo nuevo, que parecía garantizarle todo un futuro para apreciar la belleza al más elevado nivel. El deseo de expansión sin límite había sido sustituido en su corazón por la idea de que la vida estaba vacía si no se tenía una obligación personal que encauzara todas sus energías en una dirección. Le había dicho a Ralph que había «visto la vida» en un año o dos y que ya estaba cansada, no de la acción de vivir, sino de la de observar. ¿Qué había sido de todo su entusiasmo, de sus aspiraciones, de sus teorías, de la alta estima en que tenía su independencia y de la incipiente convicción de que jamás se casaría? Estas cosas habían sido absorbidas por una necesidad más primitiva, una necesidad cuya respuesta hacía desaparecer innumerables preguntas y satisfacía infinitos deseos. Simplificaba la situación de un plumazo, procedía de arriba como la luz de las estrellas y no necesitaba explicación alguna. Bastante explicación era ya el hecho de que él fuese su amado, de que le perteneciese, y de que ella fuese capaz de serle útil. Podía rendirse a él con una especie de humildad, podía casarse con él con una especie de orgullo: ella no solo recibía, también daba.

Osmond llevó a su hija dos o tres veces con él al Cascine. Pansy, que no había crecido mucho desde el año anterior, tampoco parecía mucho mayor. Su padre tenía la convicción de que siempre sería una niña, y la llevaba de la mano con dieciséis años y le decía que fuera a jugar un poco mientras él se sentaba un rato con la bella dama. Pansy

llevaba un vestido corto y un abrigo largo; el sombrero siempre parecía quedarle grande. Se divertía alejándose con pasos rápidos y cortos hasta el final del sendero, y regresando luego con una sonrisa que parecía pedir a gritos su aprobación. Isabel se la concedía en abundancia, y esa abundancia tenía el toque personal que la naturaleza cariñosa de la niña buscaba. Observaba las indicaciones de la dama como si fueran de gran importancia para ella, pues Pansy representaba ya parte del servicio que podía ofrecer y parte de la responsabilidad que podía asumir. Su padre la consideraba tan niña que aún no le había explicado la nueva relación que mantenía con la elegante señorita Archer.

—No lo sabe —le dijo Osmond a Isabel—; no se lo imagina, le parece perfectamente natural que tú y yo vengamos a pasear simplemente como buenos amigos. Encuentro algo encantador e inocente en eso, y así es como me gusta que sea. No, no soy un fracasado, como solía pensar; he triunfado en dos aspectos. Me voy a casar con la mujer que adoro y he educado a mi hija a la vieja usanza, tal como deseaba.

Le agradaba mucho la «vieja usanza» en todas las cosas; Isabel había apreciado ese gusto como uno de sus rasgos más delicados, tranquilos y sinceros.

—Se me ocurre que no sabrás si lo has conseguido hasta que se lo hayas dicho —dijo Isabel—. Hay que esperar a ver cómo se toma la noticia. Puede que la horrorice… o puede que se ponga celosa.

—Eso no me preocupa, te tiene demasiado cariño. Me gustaría dejarla en la ignorancia un poco más de tiempo para ver si finalmente se le ocurre la idea de que, si no estamos prometidos, deberíamos estarlo.

Isabel estaba impresionada con aquella visión artística, plástica, así se le antojaba, que Osmond tenía de la inocencia de Pansy, ya que su propia apreciación era más ansiosa y de carácter más moral. Sin embargo, se sintió complacida cuando Osmond le dijo unos días después que se lo había comunicado a su hija y que esta había pronunciado un hermoso y pequeño discurso: «Ah, entonces voy a tener una hermana preciosa». No había mostrado sorpresa ni alarma, no se había echado a llorar, como esperaba su padre.

—Tal vez ya lo había adivinado —dijo Isabel.

—No digas eso, no me gustaría creerlo. Pensé que tendría un ligero sobresalto, pero su reacción demuestra que su buena educación es sobresaliente. Eso es también lo que yo deseaba. Lo comprobarás por ti misma: mañana te felicitará en persona.

El encuentro al día siguiente tuvo lugar en la casa de la condesa Gemini, donde Osmond había llevado a su hija al saber que Isabel iba a acudir por la tarde para devolver la visita que aquella le había hecho cuando supo que iban a ser cuñadas. La condesa no había encontrado a Isabel en casa cuando llamó a la puerta de la señora Touchett. Una vez que la joven fue conducida al salón de la condesa, Pansy llegó para decirle que su tía se reuniría con ella en un instante. Pansy estaba pasando el día con la condesa, quien pensaba que la jovencita ya tenía edad para aprender a desenvolverse en sociedad. En opinión de Isabel, era la muchacha la que podía dar clases de conducta a su tía y nada podía haber justificado mejor esta convicción que el modo en que Pansy se desenvolvió mientras esperaban juntas la llegada de la condesa. La decisión de su padre el año anterior había sido enviarla de nuevo al convento para que sus modales quedaran definitivamente pulidos. La madre Catherine, evidentemente, se había esmerado en hacer realidad la idea de que Pansy debía estar preparada para el gran mundo.

—Papá me ha dicho que ha tenido usted la amabilidad de aceptar casarse con él —dijo la alumna de aquella excelente maestra—. Es maravilloso, creo que encajará muy bien con él.

—Y contigo, ¿crees que encajaré?

—Encajará conmigo estupendamente. Pero lo que quiero decir es que papá y usted harán muy buena pareja. Los dos son tan tranquilos y tan serios… Usted no es tan tranquila como papá, ni tampoco como madame Merle, pero es más tranquila que muchas otras personas. Por ejemplo, a mi padre no le conviene una mujer como mi tía, que siempre está en movimiento y agitada, especialmente hoy; ya lo verá cuando entre. En el convento nos enseñaron que no es correcto juzgar a nuestros mayores, pero imagino que no será malo si los juzgamos favorablemente. Será usted una maravillosa compañera para mi padre.

—Espero que para ti también —dijo Isabel.

—Hablo primero de él a propósito. Ya le he dicho lo que pienso de usted, me gustó desde el primer momento. La admiro tanto que creo que será la mejor de las fortunas poder tenerla siempre delante de mí. Será mi modelo, intentaré imitarla, aunque me temo que no será una imitación muy conseguida. Me alegro mucho por papá, necesitaba algo más aparte de mí. Sin usted no sé cómo habría sido posible. Va a ser mi madrastra, pero no debemos usar esa palabra. Siempre se ha dicho que son crueles, pero estoy segura de que nunca me pellizcará ni me empujará siquiera. No estoy nada asustada.

—Mi querida Pansy, mi pequeña —dijo Isabel con dulzura—, seré siempre buena contigo.

Una visión vaga e incoherente de la pequeña acudiendo algún día en busca de su protección se abrió paso en su mente, haciendo que la recorriese un escalofrío.

—Muy bien, no tengo nada que temer —respondió la niña con un tono de aplicada presteza.

Qué enseñanzas había recibido, parecía sugerir aquella escena, o ¡qué castigos le habían enseñado a temer por no haberlas ejecutado a la perfección!

La descripción que había hecho de su tía no era incorrecta, pues la condesa Gemini parecía menos dispuesta que nunca a plegar las alas. Entró en la habitación alborotando el aire y besó a Isabel primero en la frente y luego en ambas mejillas, como si cumpliera con algún rito antiguo. Condujo a su visita a un sofá y, observándola con distintos giros de la cabeza, comenzó a hablar sin parar, como si estuviera sentada con un pincel en la mano ante un caballete, aplicando una serie de delicados toques a una composición de figuras previamente esbozadas.

—Si esperas que te felicite, te ruego que me disculpes. Supongo que te da igual si lo hago o no; creo que no deben importarte, con lo inteligente que eres, muchas de las cosas corrientes. Pero yo me guardo de decir pequeños embustes; nunca digo uno a no ser que obtenga algo verdaderamente bueno a cambio. No veo qué podría ganar contigo, sobre todo porque no ibas a creerme. No hago declaraciones de fe del mismo modo que no hago flores de papel ni pantallas de lámpara con volantes; no sé cómo se hacen. Seguro que mis pantallas se prenderían y mis rosas y mis embustes acabarían siendo más grandes que la vida. Me alegra mucho que te cases con Osmond por mi propio interés, pero no puedo fingir que me alegre por el tuyo. Eres muy inteligente, así es como todo el mundo habla de ti; eres una heredera y eres guapa y original, en absoluto banal. Es bueno tenerte en la familia. Nuestra familia es muy buena, eso te habrá dicho Osmond; y mi madre era muy distinguida, la llamaban la Corinne americana. Pero hemos caído en una terrible decadencia, en mi opinión, y puede que tú nos levantes. Confío en ti plenamente, hay tantas cosas de las que quiero hablarte. Nunca felicito a una muchacha por casarse; pienso que debería hacerse algo para que el matrimonio no fuera una trampa tan horrible. Imagino que Pansy no debería escuchar estas cosas, pero para eso es para lo que ha acudido a mí, para aprender a comportarse en sociedad. No hay nada malo en que sepa los horrores que tal vez la esperen. Cuando supe por primera vez que mi hermano tenía unos planes que te incluían, pensé en escribirte para recomendarte encarecidamente que no le escucharas. Luego pensé que sería desleal por mi parte, y detesto ese tipo de cosas. Además, como ya he dicho, en lo que a mí respecta estaba encantada y, al fin y al cabo, soy muy egoísta. Por cierto, no me respetarás, ni siquiera un poco, y nunca seremos amigas íntimas. A mí me gustaría, pero a ti no. Algún día, a pesar de todo, seremos mejores amigas de lo que pudieras pensar en un principio. Mi esposo vendrá a visitarte aunque, como probablemente ya sabes, no tiene muy buena relación con Osmond. Le encanta visitar a mujeres hermosas, pero tú no me preocupas. En primer lugar, no me importa lo que haga y, en segundo, a ti no te importará lo más mínimo. No significará nada para ti en ningún momento y, por estúpido que sea, se dará cuenta de que no tiene nada que hacer contigo. Algún día, si puedes soportarlo, te contaré todo acerca de ese hombre. ¿Crees que mi sobrina debería salir de la habitación? Pansy, ve a practicar un poco en mi tocador.

—Por favor, deje que se quede —dijo Isabel—. Prefiero no oír nada que a Pansy no se le permita oír.

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Una tarde del otoño de 1876, hacia el anochecer, un hombre joven de agradable presencia llamó a la puerta de un pequeño apartamento en la tercera planta de una vieja casa romana. Cuando le abrieron la puerta, el joven preguntó por madame Merle y la criada, mujer pulcra y no muy agraciada, con rasgos franceses y modales de doncella, le condujo a un salón diminuto y le rogó tuviera a bien decirle su nombre.

—Señor Edward Rosier —dijo el joven, y se sentó a esperar la llegada de su anfitriona.

Quizá el lector no haya olvidado que el señor Rosier era uno de los elementos decorativos del círculo estadounidense de París, aunque también debe recordarse que en ocasiones desaparecía por completo de ese horizonte. Había pasado parte de varios inviernos en Pau y, como era un caballero de costumbres inveteradas, podría haber continuado durante años cumpliendo con su visita anual a ese lugar encantador. Sin embargo, cierto incidente ocurrido en el verano de 1876 no solo cambió sus ideas, sino también sus costumbres de siempre. Pasó un mes en la Alta Engadina y en Saint-Moritz conoció a una joven encantadora. De inmediato, comenzó a prestarle especial atención, ya que vio en ella al ángel del hogar perfecto que llevaba mucho tiempo buscando. El señor Rosier no se precipitaba jamás y era de lo más discreto, por lo que de momento se abstuvo de declarar su pasión. Sin embargo, cuando se despidieron —la joven partía hacia Italia y su admirador debía viajar a Génova, donde había prometido reunirse con unos amigos—, Rosier sintió que románticamente sería un desgraciado si no la volvía a ver. La manera más sencilla de hacerlo era viajar en otoño a Roma, donde la señorita Osmond residía con su familia. Así pues, el señor Rosier emprendió su peregrinaje a la capital italiana, adonde llegó el primero de noviembre. Era una empresa agradable, pero para el joven tenía un elemento de heroísmo. Al no estar habituado, corría el riesgo de exponerse al malsano aire romano, que en noviembre, sobre todo, estaba al acecho. La fortuna, sin embargo, favorece a los valientes, y nuestro aventurero, que ingería tres granos de quinina al día, al cabo de un mes no tenía motivos para deplorar su temeridad. Hasta cierto punto, había hecho buen uso de su tiempo tratando en vano de descubrir algún defecto en la composición de Pansy Osmond. La joven tenía un acabado perfecto; le habían dado hasta el último toque; era una pieza consumada. Pensaba a menudo en ella en amorosa meditación como habría pensado en la figura de una pastorcilla de porcelana de Dresde. Ciertamente, en el esplendor juvenil de la señorita Osmond había algo de rococó que Rosier, cuyos gustos se inclinaban hacia ese estilo, no podía sino apreciar. Su estima por las obras de períodos comparativamente frívolos se hizo evidente en la atención que dedicó al salón de madame Merle, que, si bien estaba amueblado con elementos de todos los estilos, era especialmente rico en objetos de los dos últimos siglos. De inmediato se colocó una lente en un ojo y, tras mirar a su alrededor, murmuró lleno de admiración: «¡Por Júpiter, qué cosas tan magníficas tiene!». La estancia era pequeña y estaba a rebosar de muebles; producía la impresión de que la seda desvaída y las pequeñas estatuillas se tambalearían ante el más mínimo movimiento. Rosier se puso en pie y recorrió el salón con paso cauteloso, inclinándose sobre las mesas abarrotadas de bagatelas y los almohadones bordados con escudos principescos. Cuando madame Merle entró, se lo encontró de pie ante la chimenea, con la nariz muy cerca del gran lazo de encaje que remataba el paño de damasco que cubría la repisa y que había levantado con delicadeza, como si lo estuviese oliendo.

—Es veneciano antiguo —dijo ella—, bastante bueno.

—Es demasiado bueno para tenerlo aquí; debería usted llevarlo puesto.

—Según me cuentan, usted tiene uno mejor en París y le da el mismo uso.

—Sí, pero yo no podría lucir el mío —dijo el visitante con una sonrisa.

—¡No veo por qué no! Yo tengo encajes mejores que ese para ponerme.

Rosier recorrió de nuevo el salón detenidamente con la mirada.

—Tiene usted algunas cosas muy buenas.

—Sí, pero las odio.

—¿Quiere deshacerse de ellas? —preguntó el joven con prontitud.

—No, es bueno tener algo que odiar: ¡sirve para desahogarse!

—Yo adoro mis cosas —dijo el señor Rosier mientras se sentaba y se sonrojaba por toda aquella sinceridad—. Pero

no he venido a hablar con usted de mis cosas, ni tampoco de las suyas. —Guardó silencio un instante y luego continuó con más suavidad—: Me interesa más la señorita Osmond que todos los *bibelots* de Europa.

—¿Y ha venido para decirme eso? —preguntó madame Merle con los ojos abiertos como platos.

—He venido para pedirle consejo.

La dama lo observó con una expresión amistosa, al tiempo que se acariciaba la barbilla con una amplia y blanca mano.

—Ya sabe que un hombre enamorado nunca pide consejo.

—¿Por qué no iba a hacerlo si se encuentra en una situación complicada? Es lo que suele pasar con un hombre enamorado. He estado enamorado antes y lo sé. Pero nunca tan enamorado como ahora, jamás lo había estado tanto, de verdad. Me gustaría saber en particular qué piensa usted de mis posibilidades. Me temo que para el señor Osmond yo no sea… en fin, una auténtica pieza de coleccionista.

—¿Y desea que yo interceda? —preguntó madame Merle con los elegantes brazos cruzados y levantando la comisura izquierda de la bonita boca.

—Le estaría enormemente agradecido si pudiese decir algo en mi favor. No tiene sentido que yo moleste a la señorita Osmond a menos que cuente con buenas razones para creer que su padre va a dar su consentimiento.

—Es usted muy considerado, y eso habla en su favor. Pero asume un poco a la ligera que yo le considero un buen partido.

—Usted siempre me ha tratado bien, por eso he venido —dijo el joven.

—Siempre trato bien a aquellas personas que tienen buenas piezas de estilo Luis XIV. Son muy difíciles de conseguir hoy día, y su valor es incalculable —dijo madame Merle, subrayando la broma con un gesto de la comisura izquierda de la boca.

A pesar de ello, Rosier dio la impresión de estar francamente asustado y nervioso.

—¡Ah, y yo que pensaba que le gustaba por mí mismo!

—Usted me gusta mucho, pero, por favor, no analicemos eso ahora. Discúlpeme si le parezco condescendiente, pero lo considero un perfecto caballerito. Sin embargo, debo decirle que yo no tengo la potestad de casar a Pansy Osmond.

—Nunca he pensado tal cosa, pero me pareció que era usted amiga íntima de la familia y pensé que podría tener alguna influencia.

Madame Merle reflexionó un instante.

—¿A quién considera usted su familia?

—Pues a su padre y a… ¿cómo se dice…?, su *belle-mère*.

—Ciertamente, el señor Osmond es su padre, pero su esposa apenas puede ser considerada un miembro de la familia. La señora Osmond no tiene ningún predicamento en la boda de Pansy.

—Lo lamento —dijo Rosier con un amistoso suspiro de buena fe—. Creo que la señora Osmond estaría de mi parte.

—Es muy probable, si su marido se opone.

—¿Es que le lleva la contraria a su marido? —preguntó Rosier enarcando las cejas.

—En todo. Piensan de manera completamente distinta.

—Bueno, siento que así sea, pero no es asunto mío —dijo él—. La señora Osmond quiere mucho a Pansy.

—Sí, la quiere mucho.

—Y Pansy le tiene gran afecto. Me ha dicho que la quiere como si fuera su propia madre.

—Ya veo que, después de todo, ha mantenido usted alguna conversación muy íntima con la pobre niña —dijo madame Merle—. ¿Le ha declarado sus sentimientos?

—¡Nunca! —exclamó Rosier, alzando una mano pulcramente enguantada—. No lo haré hasta conocer con seguridad los sentimientos de su familia.

—¿Siempre espera a saber eso? Tiene usted unos principios excelentes, observa las conveniencias.

—Creo que se está burlando de mí —murmuró el joven, echándose hacia atrás en la silla y acariciándose el pequeño bigote—. No me esperaba eso de usted, madame Merle.

Ella negó con la cabeza sin alterarse, como una persona que ve las cosas muy claras.

—Es usted injusto conmigo. Creo que su conducta es de un gusto excelente y la mejor que podría adoptar. Sí, eso es lo que pienso.

—Yo no quiero molestar a Pansy… así sin más. La amo demasiado para hacer algo así —dijo Ned Rosier.

—Después de todo, me alegra que me lo haya contado —prosiguió madame Merle—. Déjelo en mis manos, creo

que podré ayudarle.

—¡Sabía que era usted la persona a la que debía acudir! —exclamó el joven con una euforia repentina.

—Ha sido usted muy inteligente —respondió madame Merle de forma más seca—. Cuando digo que podré ayudarle, me refiero a que lo haré en cuanto confirme que su causa vale la pena. Examinemos si es así.

—Soy una persona muy formal, ya lo sabe —dijo Rosier con sinceridad—. No diré que no tenga defectos, pero sí que carezco de vicios.

—Todo eso es negativo, y siempre depende, también, de lo que la gente considere vicios. ¿Cuál es el lado positivo? ¿Cuál es el virtuoso? ¿Qué tiene usted además de sus encajes españoles y las tazas de té de Dresde?

—Tengo una pequeña y desahogada fortuna: unos cuarenta mil francos al año. Con mi talento para la administración, podríamos vivir espléndidamente con esos ingresos.

—Espléndidamente no, pero sí con suficiencia. Y eso dependerá de dónde vivan.

—Bueno, en París. Mi intención es vivir en París.

La comisura izquierda de la boca de madame Merle se elevó.

—No encontrarían la fama social; tendrían que usar las tazas de té y acabarían por romperse.

—Nosotros no buscamos ser famosos. Bastaría con que todo lo que tuviera la señorita Osmond fuera hermoso. Cuando se es tan hermoso como ella se puede usar… bueno, hasta una *faience* barata. No debería vestir más que muselinas… sin adorno de flores —dijo Rosier reflexivamente.

—¿Ni siquiera le permitiría los adornos? Pues le quedaría muy agradecida por esa teoría.

—Es la correcta, se lo aseguro. Y estoy convencido de que ella la aceptaría. La señorita Osmond entiende todas estas cosas. Por eso la quiero.

—Es una joven muy buena y muy ordenada, además de extremadamente agraciada. Pero, por lo que sé, su padre no puede darle nada.

Rosier ni se inmutó.

—Y yo no tengo el más mínimo interés en que lo haga. De todos modos, debo señalar que el señor Osmond vive como un rico.

—El dinero es de su esposa, que aportó una gran fortuna.

—Entonces, como la señora Osmond quiere mucho a su hijastra, quizá aporte algo.

—¡Para ser un joven enfermo de amor no se le escapa nada! —exclamó madame Merle con una carcajada.

—Yo estimo mucho una dote. Puedo vivir sin ella, pero la estimo.

—Es probable que la señora Osmond prefiera guardar el dinero para sus propios hijos —continuó madame Merle.

—¿Para sus propios hijos? ¡Si no los tiene!

—Pero aún podría tenerlos. Tuvo un pobre niño que murió hace dos años, seis meses después de nacer. Así que pueden venir otros.

—Espero que los tenga, si han de hacerla feliz. Es una mujer espléndida.

Madame Merle tardó un poco en reaccionar.

—¡Ah! De ella hay mucho que decir, por muy espléndida que le parezca. Pero no hemos llegado exactamente a la conclusión de que sea usted un buen partido. La ausencia de vicios no supone una fuente de ingresos.

—Disculpe, pero yo creo que sí —dijo Rosier con mucha lucidez.

—Formarán ustedes una pareja enternecedora, viviendo de su inocencia.

—Creo que me subestima.

—¿Es que no es usted tan inocente como parece? Hablando en serio —dijo madame Merle—, desde luego que cuarenta mil francos al año y un buen carácter son una combinación digna de tener en cuenta. No diré que sea irresistible, pero podría haber ofertas peores. No obstante, tal vez el señor Osmond piense que puede conseguir algo mejor.

—Puede que él sí, pero ¿y su hija? ¿Qué puede hacer ella que sea mejor que casarse con el hombre al que ama? Porque me ama, ¿sabe usted? —añadió Rosier con vehemencia.

—Sí, lo sé.

—¡Vaya! —exclamó el joven—, sabía que era usted la persona a la que debía acudir.

—Pero no sé cómo puede saber usted que ella lo ama, si no se lo ha preguntado —respondió madame Merle.

—En casos así no hay necesidad de preguntar ni de responder. Como dice usted, somos una pareja inocente. ¿Cómo lo ha sabido usted?

—¿Yo que no soy inocente? Pues siendo muy astuta. Déjelo de mi cuenta. Yo me encargaré de hacer averiguaciones en su lugar.

Rosier se levantó y alisó el sombrero.

—Lo dice con bastante frialdad. No se limite a averiguar cómo está la situación: trate de que sea la debida.

—Lo haré lo mejor que pueda. Intentaré sacar el máximo partido a sus méritos.

—Se lo agradezco mucho. Mientras tanto, yo hablaré con la señora Osmond.

—*Gardez-vous-en bien!* —exclamó madame Merle, poniéndose en pie—. No la mezcle en esto, o lo echará todo a perder.

Rosier examinó el interior de su sombrero, preguntándose si después de todo su anfitriona había sido la persona adecuada a la que acudir.

—Creo que no la entiendo. Soy un viejo amigo de la señora Osmond, y creo que ella querría que yo tuviese éxito.

—Sea todo lo viejo amigo que quiera. Cuantos más viejos amigos tenga mejor para ella, puesto que no se lleva del todo bien con algunos de los nuevos. Pero, por ahora, no trate de que rompa una lanza por usted. Su marido podría ser de otra opinión y, como persona que quiere lo mejor para ella, le aconsejo que no multiplique los puntos de fricción entre ellos.

En el rostro del pobre Rosier apareció una expresión de alarma. Aspirar a la mano de Pansy Osmond era un asunto más complicado de lo que su gusto por hacer las cosas con propiedad había previsto. Pero el extremado buen sentido que ocultaba bajo la apariencia del cuidadoso propietario que hace la «mejor oferta» acudió en su auxilio.

—No veo por qué tengo que tener tan en cuenta al señor Osmond —respondió.

—Cierto, pero a ella sí. Dice que es usted un viejo amigo suyo. ¿Es que quiere hacerla sufrir?

—No, por nada en el mundo.

—Pues, en ese caso, tenga mucho tiento y deje las cosas como están hasta que yo haya sondeado el asunto.

—¿Que deje las cosas como están, querida madame Merle? Recuerde que estoy enamorado.

—¡Venga, no se va a morir por eso! ¿Para qué ha venido a verme si no va a hacer caso de lo que yo le diga?

—Es usted muy amable; me portaré bien —prometió el joven—. Pero me temo que el señor Osmond sea duro de roer —añadió con voz suave mientras se dirigía a la puerta.

—Eso no es nada nuevo —dijo madame Merle tras una breve carcajada—. Pero su mujer tampoco es fácil.

—¡Es una mujer espléndida! —repitió Ned Rosier a modo de despedida.

El joven decidió que su conducta sería la propia de un pretendiente que, como era su caso, era ya un modelo de discreción, pero no vio nada en las promesas que le había hecho a madame Merle que le impidiese mantener la ilusión mediante alguna visita ocasional a la casa de la señora Osmond. Reflexionó una y otra vez acerca de los consejos de madame Merle, dándole vueltas en la cabeza a la impresión que le había causado el tono un tanto circunspecto de la dama. Había acudido a ella *de confiance*, como decían en París, pero tal vez se hubiese precipitado. Le costaba pensar en sí mismo como en alguien irreflexivo; muy rara vez se le podría haber reprochado algo así. Pero lo cierto era que solo conocía a madame Merle desde hacía un mes y que, bien pensado, su impresión de que era una mujer encantadora no garantizaba que fuera a estar dispuesta a empujar a Pansy Osmond a sus brazos, por muy preparados que estuviesen estos para recibirla. Se había mostrado sin duda benévola con él, y era una mujer respetada por la familia de la joven, con cuyos miembros mostraba una sorprendente relación (Rosier se había preguntado más de una vez cómo conseguía hacerlo) de ser íntima sin permitirse familiaridades. Pero tal vez él hubiese exagerado tales ventajas. No había ninguna razón en especial por la que madame Merle tuviera que tomarse la molestia de ayudarle. Una mujer encantadora se muestra así con todo el mundo. Y Rosier se sintió un poco tonto al pensar que se había dirigido a ella empujado por la creencia de que lo había distinguido con un trato especial. Era probable que, aunque aparentemente lo hubiese dicho en broma, solo le apreciara por sus *bibelots*. ¿Acaso se le había pasado por la cabeza que él le fuera a ofrecer dos o tres de las joyas de su colección? Si le ayudara a casarse con la señorita Osmond, le regalaría todo su museo. No era algo que le pudiese decir abiertamente, ya que parecería un soborno demasiado burdo, pero le gustaría que ella lo creyera.

Con estos pensamientos fue de nuevo a visitar a la señora Osmond a su casa, en la que organizaba reuniones todos los jueves, de modo que su presencia podía interpretarse en términos generales como cuestión de urbanidad. El objeto del afecto tan bien controlado del señor Rosier vivía en una de las casas altas, en pleno corazón de Roma, una estructura oscura y sólida que daba a una *piazzetta* soleada en el barrio del palacio Farnese. También la pequeña Pansy vivía en un palacio, según los cánones romanos, pero para la mente aprensiva del pobre Rosier semejaba una

mazmorra. Le pareció un mal presagio que la joven con la que deseaba casarse, y a cuyo exigente padre dudaba poder convencer, estuviese encarcelada en una especie de fortaleza doméstica, un enorme edificio con un severo y antiguo nombre romano que olía a sucesos históricos, a crimen, intrigas y violencia, que aparecía en la guía Murray y era visitado por turistas que, tras echar una ojeada, parecían decepcionados y deprimidos, y que tenía frescos de Caravaggio en el *piano nobile*, así como una hilera de estatuas mutiladas y urnas polvorientas en la amplia galería de nobles arcos que sobresalían en el húmedo patio donde una fuente manaba de un nicho musgoso. Podría haberle hecho mayor justicia al palazzo Roccanera si hubiese tenido el ánimo más tranquilo; podría haber compartido el sentir de la señora Osmond, quien una vez le había contado que cuando ella y su marido se instalaron en Roma escogieron aquella residencia por su afición al color local. Sin duda, al palacio no le faltaba color local, y aunque él sabía menos de arquitectura que de esmaltes de Limoges, era capaz de apreciar que las proporciones de las ventanas, e incluso los detalles de las cornisas, tenían un aire grandioso. Pero a Rosier le atormentaba la convicción de que en los tiempos pintorescos de la ciudad se encerraba allí a las jóvenes muchachas para mantenerlas alejadas de sus amores verdaderos, y que luego, ante la amenaza de ser enviadas a conventos, se veían obligadas a contraer matrimonios impíos. Había un aspecto, no obstante, al que siempre hacía justicia cuando se encontraba en los salones cálidos y ricamente amueblados de la señora Osmond, situados en la segunda planta. Reconocía que aquellas personas tenían «cosas buenas». Se debía al gusto del señor Osmond, no al de ella. Así se lo había comentado la señora Osmond la primera vez que acudió a la casa, cuando, tras preguntarse durante un cuarto de hora si su «estilo francés» era mejor que el que él tenía en París, tuvo que admitir que en efecto así era, que tenían cosas mucho mejores, y finalmente venció su envidia, como se espera de un caballero, hasta el punto de expresarle a su anfitriona la auténtica admiración que le despertaban sus tesoros. Supo por la señora Osmond que su esposo había reunido una gran colección antes de su matrimonio y que, aunque había añadido varias piezas de calidad durante los últimos tres años, sus mejores hallazgos correspondían a la época en la que el hombre había carecido de la ventaja de su consejo. Rosier interpretó esta información según sus propios principios. Se dijo a sí mismo que «consejo» significaba «dinero»; y el que Gilbert Osmond hubiese logrado sus mejores piezas durante la época en que carecía de dinero confirmaba su teoría más preciada: que un coleccionista puede ser pobre siempre que sea paciente. Por lo general, cuando Rosier se presentaba allí los jueves por la noche, su atención se centraba en primer lugar en las paredes del salón, donde había tres o cuatro objetos que sus ojos siempre buscaban con anhelo. Pero, tras su conversación con madame Merle, había comprendido la extrema gravedad de su situación; y ahora, al entrar, miró a su alrededor buscando a la hija de la casa con tanta avidez como se podía permitir un caballero cuya sonrisa, mientras cruzaba el umbral, daba por supuestas todas las comodidades domésticas.

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Pansy no se encontraba en la primera de las habitaciones, una amplia estancia de techo cóncavo y paredes recubiertas de antiguo damasco rojo. Era aquí donde solía sentarse la señora Osmond, aunque esa noche no se encontrara en su lugar habitual, rodeada por el círculo de sus amistades más íntimas en torno a la chimenea. La habitación, que resplandecía con una luz tamizada y difusa, contenía los objetos de mayor tamaño y casi siempre desprendía un aroma a flores. Pansy debía de estar en la siguiente estancia, destinada a los más jóvenes, en la que se servía el té. Osmond estaba de pie frente a la chimenea, con las manos a la espalda; tenía un pie levantado y estaba calentándose la suela. A su alrededor una media docena de personas hablaban entre sí, pero él no se sumaba a la conversación. En sus ojos tenía aquella expresión, bastante habitual en él, de parecer contemplar objetos más dignos de su interés que los que le ofrecían las simples apariencias. Rosier, que entró sin que lo anunciasen, no captó la atención de Osmond, pero el joven, que era muy puntilloso, si bien era más consciente que nunca de que había venido a ver a su esposa y no a él, se acercó a estrecharle la mano. Osmond le tendió la mano izquierda sin cambiar de postura.

—¿Cómo está usted? Mi esposa debe de andar por aquí.

—No tema, ya la encontraré —respondió Rosier alegremente.

Sin embargo, Osmond lo retuvo; nunca en su vida se había sentido el joven examinado con tanto detenimiento. «Madame Merle se lo ha contado y no le agrada», razonó para sus adentros. Había esperado que madame Merle estuviera allí, pero no la veía. Quizá se hallase en alguna de las otras estancias, o tal vez apareciese más tarde. Nunca le había caído especialmente bien Gilbert Osmond, ya que tenía la impresión de que se daba demasiados aires. Pero Rosier no era un hombre fácil de irritar y, por lo que respecta a la cortesía, se sentía impulsado a hacer siempre lo más correcto. Miró a su alrededor y sonrió, todo ello sin aparente esfuerzo, y dijo al fin:

—Hoy he visto una pieza preciosa de porcelana de Capo di Monte.

Osmond no respondió al principio.

—Me importa un bledo la porcelana de Capo di Monte —dijo al fin sin dejar de calentarse la suela de la bota.

—Espero que no esté usted perdiendo el interés…

—¿El interés por cacharros y platos viejos? Pues sí, lo estoy perdiendo.

Por un instante, Rosier olvidó su delicada situación.

—¿No estará usted pensando en deshacerse de… de una o dos piezas?

—No, no estoy pensando en deshacerme de nada en absoluto, señor Rosier —dijo Osmond, con los ojos fijos aún en los de su visitante.

—Ah, lo que quiere usted es conservar, no añadir —recalcó Rosier con animación.

—Exactamente, no tengo nada que desee emparejar.

El pobre Rosier se dio cuenta de que se había sonrojado y se sintió disgustado por aquella muestra de falta de confianza en sí mismo.

—Ah, bueno, pues yo sí —fue todo cuanto logró murmurar, consciente de que su murmullo resultó parcialmente inaudible al darse la vuelta.

Se encaminó a la estancia contigua y se encontró con la señora Osmond, que en ese momento traspasaba el umbral. Iba vestida de terciopelo negro; tenía un aire elegante y espléndido, tal como había dicho antes y, al mismo tiempo, ¡ah, tan radiante de dulzura! Ya sabemos lo que el señor Rosier pensaba de ella y los términos en los que le había expresado su admiración a madame Merle. Al igual que el aprecio que sentía por su querida hija adoptiva, el sentimiento de Rosier se basaba en parte en su gusto por lo decorativo, en su instinto por lo auténtico, pero también en su capacidad para apreciar valores sin catalogar, el secreto de un «lustre» más allá de cualquier pérdida o redescubrimiento registrado, y que su devoción por los materiales frágiles aún no le impedía reconocer. La señora Osmond, en el momento actual, habría satisfecho por completo tales gustos. La huella del paso de los años tan solo la enriquecía; la flor de su juventud no se había marchitado, tan solo se mantenía con mayor serenidad en lo alto del tallo. Había perdido un poco de aquella vehemencia pronta que su esposo había lamentado en privado; ahora tenía

más bien aspecto de saber esperar. En cualquier caso, en ese momento, enmarcada en el dorado umbral, a nuestro joven caballero le pareció el vivo retrato de una distinguida dama.

—Como puede ver, soy bastante asiduo —comentó Rosier—. Pero, si yo no lo fuese ¿quién lo iba a ser?

—Sí, le conozco a usted desde hace más tiempo que a ninguno de los presentes. Pero no debemos caer en dulces remembranzas. Quiero presentarle a una joven.

—Por supuesto, ¿de quién se trata?

Rosier se mostraba inmensamente solícito, pero no era a esto a lo que había venido.

—La joven del vestido rosa que está sentada junto a la chimenea. No tiene con quién hablar.

Rosier dudó por un instante.

—¿No puede hablar con ella el señor Osmond? Está a menos de dos metros.

La señora Osmond también titubeó.

—No es muy animada y a él no le gustan las personas insulsas.

—¿Y sí que es buena para mí? ¡Vaya, eso es duro!

—Lo único que digo es que usted tiene conversación de sobra para los dos. Y además es muy atento.

—Su marido también lo es.

—No… conmigo no —dijo la señora Osmond con una vaga sonrisa.

—Eso es señal de que debería serlo el doble con otras mujeres.

—Eso es lo que yo le digo —respondió ella sin dejar de sonreír.

—Verá… es que me apetece una taza de té —continuó Rosier, y dirigió una mirada melancólica a lo lejos.

—Perfecto. Vaya y ofrézcale también una taza a mi joven dama.

—Muy bien, pero después la abandonaré a su suerte. Lo cierto es que me muero de ganas por hablar un rato con la señorita Osmond.

—¡Ah!, en eso no puedo ayudarle —dijo Isabel dándose la vuelta.

Cinco minutos más tarde, mientras le ofrecía una taza de té a la damisela de rosa, a la que había conducido al otro salón, Rosier se preguntaba si al hacerle la confidencia a la señora Osmond que acabo de narrar no habría roto el espíritu de su promesa a madame Merle. Una cuestión de esta índole podría ocupar los pensamientos del joven durante largo rato. Al fin, no obstante, se decidió, en términos relativos, por una salida audaz: le daban igual las promesas que pudiera haber roto. El destino que le había augurado a la damisela de rosa al final no fue tan terrible, ya que Pansy Osmond, que le había servido el té para su acompañante (a Pansy siempre le gustaba preparar el té), se acercó al rato para hablar con ella. Edward Rosier participó poco en aquel coloquio ligero; se quedó sentado cerca con aire cariacontecido, sin apartar la vista de su pequeña amada. Si la examinamos ahora a través de los ojos del joven, al principio no veremos mucho que nos recuerde a aquella niña obediente que tres años atrás, en Florencia, daba pequeños paseos por el Cascine mientras su padre y la señorita Archer hablaban de asuntos reservados a los mayores. Pero, al momento, nos daremos cuenta de que si bien Pansy, a los diecinueve años, se ha convertido en una joven dama, en realidad no está a la altura de las circunstancias; que aunque se haya transformado en una bella muchacha, carece hasta un grado deplorable de esa cualidad tan apreciada en la apariencia de las mujeres que se conoce como estilo; y que si bien viste con gran frescura, lleva su elegante atuendo con evidente aire de estar preservándolo, casi como si se lo hubiesen prestado para la ocasión. Parecería que Edward Rosier es de la clase de hombres que advierten estos defectos, y de hecho no había ni una sola cualidad de esta joven, de cualquier tipo, de la que él no fuera consciente. Lo que ocurre es que a dichas cualidades les ponía sus propios calificativos, algunos de ellos bastante alegremente. «No, es única… es absolutamente única», solía decirse. Y podemos estar seguros de que ni por un solo instante habría reconocido en público que carecía de estilo. ¿Estilo? Pues claro, Pansy tenía el estilo de una princesita; quien no lo viese es que no tenía ojos. No era un estilo moderno, ni estudiado, pasaría desapercibido en Broadway; la pequeña y seria damisela, con su vestidito almidonado, parecía una infanta de Velázquez. Esto era suficiente para Edward Rosier, quien la encontraba deliciosamente pasada de moda. Sus ojos anhelantes, sus labios encantadores, su cuerpo diminuto, eran tan conmovedores como una plegaria infantil. El joven sentía ahora un intenso deseo de saber hasta qué punto le gustaba a ella, deseo que le hacía removerse en la silla. Notaba un calor tan grande que se veía obligado a enjugarse la frente con el pañuelo; jamás se había encontrado tan incómodo. Ella era una perfecta *jeune fille*, y una *jeune fille* no se le podía hacer la pregunta pertinente que arrojaría luz sobre semejante cuestión. Una *jeune fille* era lo que Rosier había soñado toda la vida, una *jeune fille* que además no fuera francesa, pues le parecía que dicha nacionalidad complicaría las cosas. Estaba seguro de que Pansy nunca había mirado un

periódico y de que, en el caso de las novelas, lo máximo que habría leído sería a sir Walter Scott. Una *jeune fille* estadounidense… ¿qué podía haber mejor que eso? Sería sincera y alegre y, no obstante, nunca habría vuelto a casa sola, ni habría recibido cartas de hombres, ni tampoco la habrían llevado al teatro a ver comedias de costumbres. Rosier era consciente de que, tal como estaban las cosas, sería una falta de hospitalidad dirigirse directamente a aquella criatura carente de sofisticación, pero en aquel instante corría el peligro inminente de preguntarse si la hospitalidad era lo más sagrado que había en el mundo. ¿Acaso no era infinitamente más importante el sentimiento que albergaba hacia la señorita Osmond? Para él sí, desde luego… pero probablemente no fuera así para el señor de la casa. Aun así, le quedaba el consuelo de que, aunque madame Merle hubiese puesto a Osmond en guardia, dicho caballero no haría la advertencia extensiva a Pansy; no habría formado parte de su estrategia advertirla de que un atractivo joven estaba enamorado de ella. Pero el atractivo joven estaba enamorado de ella, y todas aquellas circunstancias tan restrictivas habían terminado por irritarle. ¿Qué había querido indicar Gilbert Osmond al ofrecerle dos dedos de la mano izquierda? Si Osmond era grosero, estaba claro que él por su parte podía mostrarse audaz. Se sintió extremadamente audaz después de que la aburrida joven inútilmente disfrazada de rosa hubiese respondido a la llamada de su madre, quien entró a decirle, al tiempo que dedicaba a Rosier una tonta sonrisa llena de sobreentendidos, que debía acompañarla a cosechar otros triunfos. Madre e hija se habían marchado juntas, y ahora dependía solo de él quedar prácticamente a solas con Pansy. Nunca antes se había encontrado a solas con ella, jamás había estado a solas con una *jeune fille*. Era una gran momento. El pobre Rosier comenzó de nuevo a enjugarse la frente. Había otra estancia contigua a aquella en la que se encontraban, un saloncito abierto e iluminado que, al no ser numerosa la concurrencia, había permanecido vacío toda la velada. Seguía vacío en ese momento. Estaba tapizado de amarillo pálido, y había lámparas encendidas; a través de la puerta se le antojaba el templo mismo del amor autorizado. Rosier contempló un momento la estancia a través de dicha apertura; tenía miedo de que Pansy saliese corriendo y casi se sentía capaz de alargar la mano para retenerla. Pero Pansy continuaba en el mismo sitio en que la otra doncella les había dejado, sin hacer ademán de unirse al grupo de invitados que había en el lado opuesto del salón. Por un momento a Rosier se le ocurrió que quizá estuviese asustada, demasiado asustada para moverse, pero una segunda mirada le convenció de que no era así, y entonces pensó que Pansy era demasiado inocente para sentir temor. Al cabo de un rato de duda suprema, le preguntó si le permitía ir a ver el salón amarillo, que resultaba tan atractivo como virginal. Ya había estado allí con Osmond para ver los muebles franceses estilo Primer Imperio, sobre todo para admirar el reloj (que en realidad no le produjo admiración alguna), una enorme estructura clásica del mismo período. Por eso tuvo la impresión de que estaba iniciando una maniobra.

—Por supuesto que puede ir —dijo Pansy—, y se lo puedo enseñar, si quiere.

No estaba en absoluto asustada.

—Eso es precisamente lo que esperaba que me dijera, es usted muy amable —murmuró Rosier.

Entraron juntos. En realidad a Rosier la estancia le parecía muy fea y daba la impresión de ser fría. Pansy parecía pensar del mismo modo.

—No está hecha para noches de invierno, es más bien para el verano —explicó—. Está decorada al gusto de papá, que tiene mucho.

Desde luego que tenía mucho gusto, pensó Rosier, pero a veces muy malo. Miró a su alrededor. No se le ocurría qué decir en una situación semejante.

—¿No le preocupa a la señora Osmond la decoración de sus salones? ¿Es que acaso no tiene gusto? —preguntó.

—Claro que sí, tiene muchísimo; pero prefiere la literatura —respondió Pansy—, y la conversación. Aunque a papá también le gustan estas cosas. Creo que él lo sabe todo.

Rosier permaneció en silencio un instante.

—Hay una cosa que estoy seguro que sabe —dijo de pronto—. Sabe que cuando vengo aquí, con todos mis respetos hacia él y hacia la señora Osmond, que es tan encantadora, en realidad vengo a verla a usted —concluyó el joven.

—¿A verme a mí? —preguntó, y Pansy alzó unos ojos en los que se leía una vaga preocupación.

—A verla a usted, para eso vengo —repitió Rosier, sintiendo la embriaguez de infringir la autoridad.

Pansy se quedó mirándolo fijamente con expresión decidida y abierta; no necesitaba ruborizarse para que su rostro tuviese un aire más recatado.

—Imaginaba que era por eso.

—¿Y no le resultaba desagradable?

—No sabría decirle; yo no estaba enterada. Usted nunca me lo había dicho —dijo Pansy.

—Me daba miedo ofenderla.

—Usted no me ofende —murmuró la joven, sonriendo como si un ángel la hubiera besado.

—Entonces, ¿yo le gusto, Pansy? —preguntó Rosier con mucha dulzura, sintiéndose muy feliz.

—Sí… me gusta.

Se habían acercado hasta la chimenea sobre la que colgaba el enorme y frío reloj Primer Imperio; estaban al fondo del salón y ya no eran visibles desde fuera. El tono con que ella había dicho aquellas tres palabras le parecía a Rosier el aliento mismo de la naturaleza, y la única respuesta posible era tomarle la mano y mantenerla sujeta un momento. Luego se la llevó a los labios. Ella consintió, todavía con aquella sonrisa pura y confiada en la que había algo inefablemente pasivo. A ella le gustaba, le había gustado desde siempre… ¡ahora cualquier cosa podía pasar! Estaba preparada, siempre lo había estado, esperando a que él hablara. Si no lo hubiera hecho, habría esperado toda la vida; pero al oír pronunciar la palabra, cayó como un melocotón cuando se sacude el árbol. Rosier pensó que si la atraía hacia él y la estrechaba contra su corazón, ella cedería sin un murmullo, se recostaría en él sin hacer una sola pregunta. Es cierto que eso constituiría un temerario experimento en un *salottino* amarillo estilo Imperio. Pansy se había dado cuenta de que iba allí por ella y, aun así, ¡se había comportado como una perfecta y auténtica dama!

—Me es usted muy querida —murmuró el joven, intentando creer que después de todo existía algo como la hospitalidad.

Ella observó un momento el punto de la mano donde la había besado.

—¿Dice usted que papá lo sabe?

—Usted me acaba de decir que lo sabe todo.

—Creo que tendría usted que asegurarse —dijo Pansy.

—Sí, querida mía, en cuanto esté seguro de usted —susurró Rosier a su oído, tras lo cual ella se dirigió a las otras estancias con una expresión resuelta que parecía indicar que la consulta debía ser inmediata.

Mientras tanto, en las otras habitaciones se había hecho evidente la llegada de madame Merle, quien, dondequiera que fuese, siempre causaba sensación al entrar. Ni el más atento de los espectadores sabría explicar cómo lo lograba, pues ni levantaba la voz, ni se reía profusamente, ni se movía con rapidez, ni se vestía con esplendor, ni se dirigía de una forma especial a los demás. Alta, rubia, sonriente, serena, había algo en aquella tranquilidad suya que parecía emanar de su persona, y cuando la gente se giraba a mirar era porque de repente reinaba la quietud. En la ocasión que nos ocupa había hecho todo lo posible por pasar desapercibida: tras abrazar a la señora Osmond, lo cual sí fue llamativo, se había sentado en un pequeño sofá para conversar a solas con el señor de la casa. Hubo entre los dos un breve intercambio de lugares comunes (si estaban en público siempre rendían tributo formal al tópico), y luego madame Merle, que no dejaba de pasear la mirada a su alrededor, preguntó si el joven señor Rosier había acudido aquella noche.

—Llegó hace casi una hora, pero ha desaparecido —respondió Osmond.

—¿Y dónde está Pansy?

—En el otro salón. Hay varias personas allí.

—Seguramente Rosier se encuentre entre ellos —dijo madame Merle.

—¿Es que desea usted verlo? —preguntó Osmond, utilizando un tono neutro un tanto provocativo.

Madame Merle lo observó un instante; conocía al dedillo cada uno de sus tonos.

—Sí, me gustaría decirle que ya le he dicho lo que él quería, y que usted ha mostrado interés, aunque no en exceso.

—No le diga eso. Tratará de que me muestre más interesado… que es precisamente lo que yo no quiero. Dígale que detesto su propuesta.

—Pero usted no la detesta.

—Eso no importa. Tampoco me encanta. Ya se lo he dado a entender yo mismo esta noche. Me he mostrado grosero con él a propósito. Estas cosas son un fastidio. No hay prisa alguna.

—Le diré que se va a tomar usted un tiempo para pensarlo.

—No, no lo haga. Seguirá insistiendo.

—Si lo desanimo, hará lo mismo.

—Sí, pero en el primer caso intentará hablar y explicarse, lo cual sería de lo más tedioso. En el otro, probablemente se muerda la lengua y opte por iniciar una maniobra más sibilina. Así podré estar tranquilo. Odio hablar con un asno.

—¿Así es como califica al pobre señor Rosier?

—Es un auténtico incordio… siempre a vueltas con la dichosa mayólica.

Madame Merle bajó la mirada y esbozó una leve sonrisa.

—Es un caballero, tiene un carácter encantador y, al fin y al cabo, ¡una renta de cuarenta mil francos!

—Eso es una miseria… «decente», pero una miseria —dijo Osmond de forma brusca—. No es lo que yo he soñado para Pansy.

—Está bien. Él me ha prometido no hablar con Pansy.

—¿Y usted le cree? —preguntó Osmond con aire distraído.

—Claro que sí. Pansy ha estado pensando mucho en él, pero imagino que para usted eso carece de importancia.

—Para mí no tiene ni la más mínima; pero tampoco creo que Pansy haya pensado en él.

—Es más cómodo creer eso —dijo madame Merle con voz tranquila.

—¿Es que le ha dicho que está enamorada de él?

—¿Por quién la toma? ¿Y por quién me toma a mí? —añadió madame Merle tras un instante.

Osmond había levantado el pie y ahora apoyaba el delgado tobillo en la otra rodilla, sujetándolo con la mano en un gesto habitual (podía rodearlo por completo entre el pulgar y el largo y delicado índice), y durante un rato pareció tener la mirada perdida.

—Este asunto no me pilla desprevenido. Para esto precisamente la he educado. Todo ha sido con este fin, para que cuando llegue el momento ella haga lo que yo estime más conveniente.

—No dudo que eso sea lo que haga.

—Entonces, ¿dónde está el problema?

—No veo problema alguno. Pero, de todos modos, le recomiendo que no se deshaga del señor Rosier. Téngalo a mano, podría serle útil.

—No puedo conservarlo. Hágalo usted.

—Muy bien, lo pondré en un rincón y le daré su ración diaria.

Durante la mayor parte de la conversación madame Merle había estado mirando a su alrededor. Era lo que solía hacer en situaciones así, como también lo era interrumpir su charla con frecuentes pausas vacías de expresión. Un prolongado silencio siguió a las últimas palabras que he citado. Y antes de ponerle fin, madame Merle vio a Pansy entrar desde el salón contiguo, seguida de Edward Rosier. La joven avanzó unos pasos y luego se detuvo, mirando a madame Merle y a su padre.

—Ya ha hablado con ella —le dijo madame Merle a Osmond.

Su interlocutor ni siquiera giró la cabeza.

—Para que se fíe usted de sus promesas. Merecería que le azotasen.

—Tiene intención de confesar. ¡Pobre muchacho!

Osmond se levantó, no sin antes dirigir una mirada penetrante a su hija.

—No importa —murmuró mientras se daba la vuelta.

Un instante después, Pansy se acercó a madame Merle con su habitual actitud de cortesía carente de familiaridades. La manera en que la dama la recibió no fue más íntima: se limitó a dirigirle una sonrisa amistosa mientras se levantaba del sofá.

—Ha llegado usted muy tarde —dijo aquella joven criatura con suavidad.

—Mi querida niña, nunca llego más tarde de lo que pretendo.

Madame Merle no se había puesto en pie por cortesía hacia Pansy; se dirigía al encuentro de Edward Rosier. Él se acercó a su vez y le susurró muy deprisa, como si quisiera quitarse aquel peso de su alma cuanto antes:

—He hablado con ella.

—Lo sé, señor Rosier.

—¿Se lo ha dicho ella?

—Sí, me lo ha dicho. Compórtese como es debido el resto de la velada y venga a verme mañana a las cinco y cuarto.

Habló con severidad, y en la forma en que le dio la espalda hubo un punto de desprecio que hizo que el joven mascullase una imprecación decorosa.

Rosier no tenía la menor intención de hablar con Osmond; no eran la ocasión ni el lugar propicios. Pero de forma instintiva se fue acercando a Isabel, que estaba sentada hablando con una anciana señora. El joven tomó asiento al otro lado; la anciana era italiana y Rosier dio por hecho que no entendería ni una palabra de inglés.

—Hace un momento me dijo que no iba a ayudarme —comenzó a decirle a la señora Osmond—. Quizá cambie de

opinión cuando sepa… cuando sepa…

—¿Cuando sepa qué? —preguntó Isabel ante su indecisión.

—Que a ella le parece bien.

—¿Qué me quiere decir con eso?

—Pues… que hemos llegado a un entendimiento.

—Pansy se equivoca por completo —dijo Isabel—. No va a ser posible.

El pobre Rosier la miró medio suplicante, medio furioso; un rubor repentino reveló hasta qué punto se sentía herido.

—Jamás me han tratado de esta forma —dijo—. ¿Qué tienen contra mí? No es esta la forma en que se me trata normalmente. Podría haberme casado ya veinte veces.

—Qué lástima que no lo hiciese. No quiero decir veinte veces, sino solo una, y felizmente —añadió Isabel sonriendo con amabilidad—. No es usted lo suficientemente rico para Pansy.

—A ella le trae sin cuidado el dinero que yo tenga.

—Ya, pero a su padre no.

—¡Eso está claro! ¡Lo ha demostrado de sobra! —exclamó el joven.

Isabel se levantó, alejándose de él y abandonando a la anciana sin mayor ceremonia; y Rosier dedicó los diez minutos siguientes a simular que observaba la colección de miniaturas de Gilbert Osmond, perfectamente ordenadas en una serie de pequeños estuches de terciopelo. Pero miraba sin ver, le ardían las mejillas, estaba completamente ofuscado por el sentimiento de agravio. Era cierto que jamás lo habían tratado de esa forma; no estaba acostumbrado a que pensasen que no era suficientemente bueno. Él sabía lo que valía y se habría echado a reír de no ser tan perniciosa aquella falacia. Buscó de nuevo a Pansy, pero había desaparecido, y su mayor deseo en aquel instante era marcharse de la casa. Pero antes habló de nuevo con Isabel. No le resultaba agradable pensar que acababa de decirle algo muy descortés: era lo único que podría justificar que ahora tuviese una pobre opinión de él.

—Hace un rato me he referido al señor Osmond en términos que no debería haber empleado —comenzó—. Pero espero que tenga usted en cuenta mi situación.

—Ya no recuerdo lo que ha dicho —respondió ella fríamente.

—Ah, se siente ofendida. Ahora sí que no me va a ayudar.

Isabel permaneció en silencio un momento y luego dijo cambiando de tono:

—¡No es que no quiera hacerlo, es que simplemente no puedo!

Su actitud era casi apasionada.

—Si solo pudiera… aunque fuese un poco, nunca más volvería a hablar de su marido salvo para decir que es un ángel.

—El incentivo es grande —contestó Isabel con gravedad… con aire inescrutable, como más tarde lo describiría él para sus adentros; y la mirada que le dirigió, directamente a los ojos, fue asimismo inescrutable. Le hizo recordar en cierta forma que la había conocido siendo casi una niña; sin embargo, resultaba demasiado penetrante para su gusto, y optó por marcharse.

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Al día siguiente, Rosier fue a visitar a madame Merle y, para su sorpresa, no le fue tan mal como pensaba. No obstante, madame Merle le hizo prometer que no haría nada en tanto no hubiera nada decidido. El señor Osmond había forjado grandes expectativas para su hija; y era muy cierto que, como no tenía intención de darle una dote, tales expectativas se prestaban a la crítica o incluso, si se quería, al ridículo. Pero ella le aconsejaba al señor Rosier que no adoptase esa actitud, ya que, si era paciente, tal vez lograse la felicidad que anhelaba. El señor Osmond no se mostraba favorable a su propósito, pero no sería un milagro que poco a poco fuese cambiando de opinión. Pansy jamás desafiaría a su padre, de eso podía estar seguro, de modo que no se ganaría nada actuando con precipitación. El señor Osmond necesitaba tiempo para acostumbrarse a la idea de una oferta que hasta ese momento no había contemplado, y el resultado debía llegar por sí mismo, era inútil tratar de forzarlo. Rosier comentó que su posición sería mientras tanto la más incómoda del mundo, y madame Merle le aseguró que lo sentía por él. Sin embargo, como dijo con acierto, no se podía tener todo lo que uno quería, lección que había aprendido por sí misma. Tampoco valdría la pena que escribiese al señor Osmond, quien le había encargado a ella que así se lo comunicase. El señor Osmond deseaba aplazar el asunto durante unas semanas y le escribiría cuando tuviese algo que decir que pudiese complacer al señor Rosier.

—No le gusta que haya hablado con Pansy. No le gusta en absoluto —dijo madame Merle.

—Estoy completamente dispuesto a darle ocasión de decírmelo en persona.

—Si hace eso, le dirá más de lo que usted desea escuchar. Durante el próximo mes, vaya a la casa lo menos posible y déjeme el resto a mí.

—¿Lo menos posible? ¿Y quién va a evaluar tal posibilidad?

—Permita que yo lo haga. Vaya los jueves por la noche, cuando va todo el mundo, pero no se presente en ningún otro momento. Y no se preocupe por Pansy. Yo me encargaré de que lo comprenda todo. Es de naturaleza tranquila y se lo tomará con calma.

Edward Rosier sufrió mucho por Pansy, pero hizo lo que le habían aconsejado y esperó al siguiente jueves para regresar al palazzo Roccanera. Había una cena con invitados, de modo que, aunque acudió temprano, la compañía ya era numerosa cuando llegó. Osmond, como de costumbre, estaba en la primera estancia, junto al fuego y mirando de frente a la puerta, por lo que Rosier, para no mostrarse claramente descortés, tuvo que ir y hablar con él.

—Me alegra que sea usted capaz de captar una indirecta —dijo el padre de Pansy, entornando ligeramente sus ojos agudos y perspicaces.

—No he captado ninguna indirecta. Lo que he hecho es recoger un mensaje, o así fue como yo lo entendí.

—¿Que recogió un mensaje? ¿De dónde?

El pobre Rosier tenía la sensación de que le estaban insultando y decidió esperar un momento, preguntándose hasta dónde debía aguantar un verdadero enamorado.

—Madame Merle, por lo que yo entendí, me transmitió un mensaje suyo, dando a entender que usted declinaba darme la oportunidad que yo busco, la oportunidad de explicarle mis intenciones —dijo, vanagloriándose un tanto de sonar tan serio.

—No veo qué tiene que ver madame Merle en todo este asunto. ¿Por qué acudió a ella?

—Para pedirle consejo, nada más. Lo hice porque me pareció que le conocía a usted muy bien.

—No me conoce todo lo bien que ella cree —dijo Osmond.

—Lamento escuchar eso, porque me ha dado una pequeña esperanza.

—Yo valoro en mucho a mi hija —respondió Osmond fijando la vista en el fuego un instante.

—No puede valorarla más de lo que yo lo hago. ¿Acaso no lo demuestro al desear casarme con ella?

—Quiero casarla muy bien —continuó Osmond de una manera impertinente y seca que, en otro estado de ánimo, el pobre Rosier habría admirado.

—Por supuesto, mi intención es que haga un buen matrimonio casándose conmigo. No podría casarse con un hombre que la quiera más o a quien, me atrevo a añadir, ella quiera más.

—No tengo por qué aceptar sus teorías acerca de a quién quiere mi hija —dijo Osmond, levantando la vista con una sonrisa rápida y fría.

—No son teorías. Su hija lo ha dicho.

—A mí no me ha dicho nada —dijo Osmond, inclinándose un poco hacia delante y contemplando la punta de sus botas.

—¡Tengo su promesa, señor! —exclamó Rosier con la acritud de la exasperación.

Como hasta entonces habían hablado en voz baja, la subida de tono atrajo la atención de algunos invitados. Osmond esperó a que la pequeña agitación se disipara.

—Creo que ella no recuerda haber hecho promesa alguna —dijo al cabo de un rato, completamente impasible.

Ambos estaban de pie y de cara al fuego, y tras pronunciar estas últimas palabras, el señor de la casa se giró de nuevo hacia el salón. Antes de que pudiera responder, Rosier advirtió que un caballero desconocido acababa de entrar sin ser anunciado, según la costumbre romana, y se acercaba con intención de presentarse a su anfitrión. Este le sonrió levemente, pero con cierta extrañeza. El visitante tenía un rostro atractivo, con barba larga y rubia, y era, sin duda, inglés.

—Parece que no me reconoce —dijo con una sonrisa más expresiva que la de Osmond.

—Ah, sí, ahora me acuerdo. No esperaba volver a verle.

Rosier se alejó y fue directamente en busca de Pansy. La buscó, como de costumbre, en el salón contiguo, pero de nuevo se encontró en el camino con la señora Osmond. No saludó a su anfitriona, pues aún se sentía justamente indignado, y le dijo con cierta crudeza:

—Su marido tiene una sangre fría tremenda.

Isabel le dedicó la misma sonrisa mística que ya le había visto antes.

—No puede esperar que todo el mundo sea igual de ardiente que usted.

—No pretendo ser frío, pero mantengo la calma. ¿Qué le ha estado haciendo a su hija?

—No tengo ni idea.

—¿Es que no le interesa? —preguntó Rosier con la sensación de que ella era igual de irritante.

—¡No! —dijo ella tras una pausa, de forma brusca y con una luz agitada en la mirada que contradecía su respuesta.

—Discúlpeme pero no lo creo. ¿Dónde está la señorita Osmond?

—En el rincón, preparando el té. No la moleste, por favor.

Rosier divisó entonces a su amiga, que los corrillos de invitados interpuestos le habían ocultado. La miró, pero la atención de Pansy estaba centrada por completo en su tarea.

—¿Qué demonios le ha hecho? —volvió a preguntar, implorante—. Su marido me asegura que ella ha renunciado a mí.

—No ha renunciado a usted —dijo Isabel en voz baja y sin mirarle.

—¡Ah, gracias por decírmelo! Ahora la dejaré tranquila el tiempo que usted estime oportuno.

Apenas había terminado de hablar cuando vio que la señora Osmond cambiaba de color y observó que el señor Osmond se acercaba acompañado por el caballero que acababa de llegar. Este parecía un tanto azorado a pesar de su aspecto apuesto y de su evidente desenvoltura en sociedad.

—Isabel, te traigo a un viejo amigo —dijo su esposo.

La cara de la señora Osmond, aunque sonreía, reflejaba cierta inseguridad, al igual que la de su viejo conocido.

—Me alegro mucho de verle, lord Warburton —dijo.

Rosier se dio la vuelta y, ahora que su conversación con Isabel había sido interrumpida, se sintió dispensado de la pequeña promesa que le acababa de hacer. Tuvo la súbita impresión de que la señora Osmond no iba a darse cuenta de lo que él hiciese.

A decir verdad, Isabel dejó de observarlo durante un buen rato. Se había sobresaltado; no sabía si lo que sentía era placer o dolor. Lord Warburton, no obstante, sí que sabía lo que sentía ahora que estaba cara a cara frente a ella. Aunque sus ojos grises aún conservaban aquella excelente facultad de reflejar un reconocimiento y un testimonio sinceros, parecía más «robusto» que antaño, y más viejo. Y allí estaba él, todo consistencia, todo cordura.

—Imagino que no esperaba verme —dijo—. Acabo de llegar, como quien dice. He llegado esta misma noche. Ya ve que no he perdido tiempo en venir a presentarle mis respetos. Sabía que los jueves recibe usted en casa.

—Fíjate, la fama de tus jueves se ha extendido hasta Inglaterra —le dijo Osmond a su esposa.

—Es muy amable por su parte haber venido tan pronto; nos sentimos muy halagados —dijo Isabel.

—Sí, bueno, sin duda es mejor que quedarse en una de esas horribles posadas —prosiguió Osmond.

—El hotel parece muy bueno, creo que es el mismo en el que le vi a usted hace cuatro años. Fue aquí en Roma donde nos conocimos; ha pasado ya mucho tiempo. ¿Recuerda dónde me despedí de usted? —preguntó su señoría a la anfitriona—. Fue en el Capitolio, en la primera sala.

—Yo mismo lo recuerdo —dijo Osmond—. También estaba allí entonces.

—Sí, le recuerdo a usted allí. Yo me sentía muy triste por marcharme de Roma… tanto que, de alguna manera, la ciudad se convirtió en un recuerdo deprimente y nunca he querido regresar hasta hoy. Pero sabía que estaban viviendo aquí —le dijo a Isabel—, y le aseguro que he pensado mucho en usted. Debe de ser un lugar fantástico para vivir —añadió con una mirada a su alrededor, en la que ella podría haber captado el fantasma borroso de su antiguo pesar.

—Habríamos estado encantados de verle en cualquier momento —observó Osmond con cortesía.

—Muchas gracias. No he salido de Inglaterra desde entonces. Pensaba realmente que mis viajes se habían acabado hasta hace un mes.

—He tenido noticias de usted de vez en cuando —dijo Isabel, que con su capacidad única para tales proezas del interior, se había dado ya cuenta de lo que significaba para ella volver a verlo.

—Espero que no haya oído nada malo. Mi vida ha sido prácticamente una hoja en blanco.

—Como los buenos reinados de la historia —sugirió Osmond.

Dichas esas palabras pareció pensar que sus deberes como anfitrión habían llegado a su fin, y que los había desempeñado a conciencia. Nada podría haber resultado más adecuado, más amablemente medido, que su cortesía hacia el amigo de su esposa. Era una cortesía puntillosa, explícita, cualquier cosa excepto natural, una deficiencia que lord Warburton, tan natural en todos sus actos, sin duda habría percibido.

—Le dejo con la señora Osmond —añadió—. Tienen ustedes recuerdos de los que no formo parte.

—¡Me temo que sea mucho lo que se pierde! —dijo lord Warburton mientras Osmond se alejaba, en un tono que revelaba quizá una excesiva apreciación de su generosidad. Después, el visitante posó en Isabel una mirada más profunda y consciente, que gradualmente se fue tornando más seria—. Estoy muy contento de verla.

—Es un placer. Es usted muy amable.

—¿Sabe que ha cambiado usted… un poco?

—Sí, he cambiado, pero mucho —dijo Isabel tras un ligero titubeo.

—No para peor, desde luego. Pero, por otra parte, ¿cómo puedo decir que sea para mejor?

—Creo que yo no tendría escrúpulo alguno en decírselo a usted —respondió ella con arrojo.

—Ah, bueno, para mí… ha pasado mucho tiempo. Sería una pena que no se me notase en algo. —Se sentaron, e Isabel le preguntó por sus hermanas y otros asuntos superficiales. Lord Warburton respondía a las preguntas de su anfitriona como si le interesasen, y al cabo de unos minutos ella vio, o creyó ver, que su presión no sería tan feroz como años atrás. El aliento del Tiempo había tocado su corazón, sin enfriarlo, de manera que le había procurado una sensación de reposo. Isabel sintió renacer la estima que habitualmente le despertaba el Tiempo. La actitud de su amigo era la de un hombre satisfecho, que deseaba que la gente, o al menos ella, le viera así—. Debo decirle algo sin más demora —prosiguió—. Ralph Touchett ha venido conmigo.

—¿Ha venido con usted? —preguntó Isabel muy sorprendida.

—Está en el hotel. Se encontraba demasiado cansado para salir y se ha acostado.

—Iré a verlo —dijo ella de inmediato.

—Eso es lo que yo esperaba que hiciera. Tenía la sensación de que no se habían visto mucho desde su boda, que de hecho su relación era un poco… un poco más formal. De ahí mis dudas, fruto de mi torpeza británica.

—Le tengo a Ralph el mismo cariño de siempre —respondió Isabel—. Pero ¿por qué ha venido a Roma?

La declaración fue tierna, la pregunta un poco ansiosa.

—Porque está realmente mal, señora Osmond.

—Entonces Roma no es el mejor sitio para estar. Me dijo que había decidido abandonar su costumbre de pasar los inviernos fuera y que se quedaría en Inglaterra, dentro de casa, en lo que él llamaba un clima artificial.

—Pobre hombre, no le sienta muy bien lo artificial. Fui a visitarle hace tres semanas a Gardencourt y lo encontré muy enfermo. Ha ido empeorando año tras año, y ya no le quedan fuerzas. ¡Ya ni siquiera fuma! Desde luego que había creado un clima artificial… en la casa hacía tanto calor como en Calcuta. De todos modos, de repente se le metió en la cabeza irse a Sicilia. No me pareció buena idea, tampoco a los médicos ni a ninguno de sus amigos. Su

madre, como imagino que ya sabrá, está en Estados Unidos, así que no había nadie para impedírselo. Se había aferrado a la idea de que su salvación estaría en pasar el invierno en Catania. Dijo que podría llevarse sirvientes y muebles para instalarse cómodamente, pero lo cierto es que al final no ha traído nada consigo. Yo quería que al menos viajara por mar, para ahorrarle fatigas, pero me dijo que no soporta el mar y que además deseaba hacer una parada en Roma. Después de oír eso, y a pesar de que todo este asunto me parece una insensatez, decidí acompañarlo. Me comporto igual que… ¿cómo lo llaman ustedes en Estados Unidos…?, que una especie de moderador. Últimamente el pobre Ralph está ya muy moderado. Salimos de Inglaterra hace quince días y desde entonces se encuentra muy mal. No consigue entrar en calor y, cuanto más bajamos al sur, más frío tiene. Le acompaña un criado bastante eficiente, pero me temo que ya es humanamente imposible hacer nada por él. Yo quería que viajara con alguien de fiar, quiero decir, con un médico joven e inteligente; pero no quiso ni oír hablar de eso. Si me permite que se lo diga, creo que la señora Touchett ha elegido el momento más inoportuno para irse a Estados Unidos.

Isabel había escuchado ansiosamente; su rostro reflejaba dolor y asombro.

—Mi tía viaja siempre en las mismas fechas, y no hay nada que le pueda hacer cambiar de planes. En cuanto llega el día, se marcha. Creo que se habría ido aunque Ralph hubiese estado agonizando.

—Algunas veces pienso que está agonizando —dijo lord Warburton.

Isabel se levantó como impulsada por un resorte.

—Ahora mismo voy a verlo.

Lord Warburton la retuvo, un poco desconcertado por el rápido efecto de sus palabras.

—No digo que esté agonizando esta noche. Al contrario, hoy en el tren parecía encontrarse especialmente bien. La idea de nuestra llegada a Roma… le gusta mucho Roma, ya sabe… le ha dado fuerzas. Hace una hora, al darle las buenas noches, me dijo que estaba muy cansado, pero muy feliz. Vaya a verlo por la mañana, solo le pido eso. Él no sabe que he venido aquí. No lo he decidido hasta después de dejarlo, cuando he recordado que me había dicho que usted organizaba una velada, y que era justo hoy jueves. Se me ha ocurrido venir a decirle que Ralph está aquí y que quizá sea mejor no esperar a que él la avise. Creo que me dijo que no le había escrito a usted. —No era necesario que Isabel prometiera actuar de acuerdo con la información brindada por lord Warburton. Su aspecto, allí sentada, era el de un pajarillo al que se le impide echar a volar—. Aparte de que yo quería verla en persona —añadió galante.

—No entiendo el plan de Ralph; me parece una auténtica locura —dijo Isabel—. Me gustaba pensar que se encontraba rodeado por los gruesos muros de Gardencourt.

—Allí estaba completamente solo; los gruesos muros eran su única compañía.

—Usted iba a visitarlo; ha sido muy amable.

—Por Dios bendito, no tenía otra cosa que hacer —dijo lord Warburton.

—Al contrario, nos consta que está usted haciendo grandes cosas. Todo el mundo habla de usted como de un gran estadista y veo constantemente su nombre en el *Times*, que, por cierto, no parece tenerle mucha estima. Por lo visto, sigue siendo usted tan radical como siempre.

—Ya no me siento así; parece que el mundo se está poniendo de mi parte. Touchett y yo hemos mantenido una especie de debate parlamentario durante todo el viaje desde Londres. Yo le digo que es el último de los tories y él me llama el rey de los godos, pues dice que tengo, hasta en los últimos detalles de mi apariencia, todos los rasgos del bárbaro. Ya ve que todavía hay vida en él.

Isabel tenía muchas preguntas que hacer acerca de Ralph, pero se abstuvo de formularlas. Al día siguiente saldría de dudas por sí misma. Comprendió que lord Warburton se cansaría del asunto en breve; probablemente tenía en mente otros posibles temas de conversación. Cada vez estaba más convencida de que su amigo se había recuperado y, lo que es más importante, lo podía decir sin amargura. Desde hacía mucho tiempo lord Warburton había sido para ella una representación tal de la urgencia, de la insistencia, de algo a lo que había que resistirse y con lo que había que razonar, que su reaparición en un primer momento pareció amenazarla con nuevos problemas. Pero ahora se sentía más tranquila, veía que solo quería mantener una buena relación con ella, darle a entender que la había perdonado y que no tenía el mal gusto de lanzar acusaciones veladas. Esto no era, desde luego, una forma de venganza. No temía que lord Warburton deseara castigarla exhibiendo su frustración. Fue justa con él al creer que simplemente se le había ocurrido que a ella le interesaría saber que se había resignado. Era la resignación de una personalidad sana y varonil en la que las heridas sentimentales no podían infectarse jamás. La política británica le había curado; Isabel había sabido que sería así. Tuvo un pensamiento lleno de envidia acerca de la suerte de los

hombres, quienes siempre son libres de sumergirse en las aguas curativas de la acción. Lord Warburton hablaba desde luego del pasado, pero lo hacía sin segundas intenciones; había llegado incluso a referirse a su anterior encuentro en Roma como un momento muy feliz. Y le dijo que le había interesado mucho recibir noticias de su boda y que era para él un gran placer conocer al señor Osmond, ya que no podía decirse que en aquella anterior ocasión se hubiesen conocido de verdad. No le había escrito en aquel momento fundamental de su vida, pero no se disculpó. Lo único que dio a entender es que eran viejos amigos, amigos íntimos. Y en calidad de amigo íntimo, tras una breve pausa durante la que había mirado sonriente a su alrededor como una persona que se entretiene en una reunión provinciana con una especie de inocente juego de adivinanzas, de repente le dijo:

—Bueno, supongo que ahora es usted muy feliz y todas esas cosas, ¿no?

Isabel respondió con una pronta carcajada. El tono de su observación le pareció de comedia.

—¿Cree usted que si no lo fuera se lo diría?

—Pues no lo sé. No veo por qué no.

—Yo sí. Sin embargo, afortunadamente, soy muy feliz.

—Tiene usted una casa maravillosa.

—Sí, es muy agradable. Pero el mérito no es mío, sino de mi esposo.

—¿Quiere decir que él la ha arreglado?

—Sí, no valía nada cuando llegamos.

—Debe de ser un hombre de gran talento.

—Es un genio de los tapizados —dijo Isabel.

—Hoy en día ese tipo de cosas causan furor. Pero usted debe de tener su propio gusto.

—Disfruto de las cosas cuando ya están hechas, pero no aporto ideas. Nunca soy capaz de proponer nada.

—¿Quiere decir que acepta lo que los demás le proponen?

—Y de muy buen grado, por lo general.

—Es bueno saberlo. Aprovecharé para proponerle alguna cosa.

—Será un placer. No obstante, debo decirle que tengo algo de iniciativa en algunos asuntos menores. Por ejemplo, me gustaría presentarle a algunas de estas personas.

—No se moleste, por favor. Prefiero quedarme aquí sentado. A no ser que se trate de esa señorita del vestido azul. Tiene un rostro encantador.

—¿Se refiere a la que está hablando con el joven de tez sonrosada? Es la hija de mi marido.

—Su marido es un hombre afortunado. ¡Qué señorita tan linda!

—Voy a presentársela.

—Dentro de un momento… será un placer. Me gusta contemplarla desde aquí. —Sin embargo, dejó de mirarla muy pronto. Sus ojos se dirigían todo el tiempo a la señora Osmond—. ¿Sabe que me equivocaba antes al decirle a usted que ha cambiado? —prosiguió—. Después de todo, me parece que sigue siendo la misma.

—Pues a mí me parece que estar casada es un gran cambio —respondió Isabel con leve jovialidad.

—A usted la ha afectado menos que a la mayoría de la gente. Como ve, yo no me he decidido.

—Me sorprende bastante.

—Debería usted entenderlo, señora Osmond. Pero sí que quiero casarme —añadió con sencillez.

—Debería resultarle fácil —dijo Isabel mientras se levantaba, comprendiendo después, con una punzada tal vez demasiado visible, de que no era la persona más adecuada para decir aquello.

Quizá porque había advertido aquella punzada, lord Warburton se abstuvo generosamente de recordarle que ella no había contribuido a facilitar las cosas.

Mientras tanto, Edward Rosier se había sentado en un otomán junto a la mesa del té de Pansy. Al principio intentó hablar con ella de cosas triviales, y ella le preguntó quién era el caballero recién llegado que conversaba con su madrastra.

—Es un lord inglés —contestó Rosier—. No sé nada más.

—Me pregunto si le apetecerá té. A los ingleses les gusta mucho.

—Eso da igual; tengo algo importante que decirle.

—No hable tan alto… le van a oír —dijo Pansy.

—No oirán nada si continúa usted con esa expresión como si lo único que le importase en el mundo es que el agua de la tetera hierva.

—Acabo de llenarla; los criados no saben estar por la labor.

Pansy suspiró, agobiada por el peso de la responsabilidad.

—¿Sabe lo que acaba de decirme su padre? Que no era verdad lo que me dijo usted hace una semana.

—No todo lo que digo es verdad. Las muchachas somos así. Pero con usted sí que hablo en serio.

—Me ha dicho que usted me había olvidado.

—Ah, no, no lo he olvidado —dijo Pansy, mostrando sus bonitos dientes en una sonrisa fija.

—Entonces, ¿todo sigue igual?

—No, no todo sigue igual. Papá ha sido terriblemente severo.

—¿Qué le ha hecho?

—Me preguntó qué me había hecho usted a mí, y se lo conté todo. Entonces me prohibió casarme con usted.

—No tiene por qué hacerle caso.

—Oh, sí, debo hacerlo. No puedo desobedecer a papá.

—¿No puede desobedecerle por alguien que la ama como yo, y a quien usted dice amar?

Pansy levantó la tapa de la tetera y contempló el recipiente un momento; luego dejó caer siete palabras en sus aromáticas profundidades:

—Mi amor por usted es el mismo.

—¿Y de qué me servirá eso?

—Ah —dijo Pansy levantando su mirada dulce y distraída—, eso no lo sé.

—Me decepciona usted —gimió el pobre Rosier.

Ella calló un instante, y le pasó una taza de té a un criado.

—Por favor, no siga hablando.

—¿Es toda la satisfacción que puedo esperar?

—Papá me dijo que no debo hablar con usted.

—¿Y usted me sacrifica así? ¡Esto es demasiado!

—Me gustaría que esperara un poco —dijo la joven con voz temblorosa.

—Por supuesto que esperaré si me ofrece alguna esperanza, pero me cuesta la vida.

—No renunciaré a usted, ¡de ninguna manera! —añadió Pansy.

—Su padre intentará casarla con otra persona.

—Jamás haré algo semejante.

—Entonces, ¿a qué tenemos que esperar?

Pansy volvió a vacilar.

—Hablaré con la señora Osmond y ella nos ayudará.

Así era como se refería generalmente a su madrastra.

—No nos ayudará mucho. Tiene miedo.

—¿Miedo de qué?

—De su padre, imagino.

Pansy negó con la cabecita.

—Ella no tiene miedo de nadie. Debemos tener paciencia.

—¡Ah, qué horrible palabra! —se lamentó Rosier.

Estaba profundamente desconcertado. Olvidando las costumbres de la buena sociedad, dejó caer la cabeza entre sus manos y, sujetándola con gracia melancólica, miró fijamente la alfombra. Tras unos instantes se dio cuenta de que había cierto revuelo a su alrededor y, al levantar la vista, vio a Pansy haciendo una reverencia —aquella pequeña reverencia aprendida en el convento— al lord inglés que la señora Osmond le estaba presentando.

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Probablemente no sorprenda al lector reflexivo que Ralph Touchett hubiera visto menos a su prima desde que esta se había casado que con anterioridad a dicho acontecimiento, sobre el que él tenía una opinión que no podía esperarse que reafirmara la intimidad entre ambos. Como sabemos, Ralph dijo lo que pensaba y luego guardó silencio, pues Isabel no lo invitó a retomar una conversación que supuso un antes y un después en su relación. Esa conversación había marcado una diferencia: la diferencia que más temía, y no la que deseaba. No había enfriado la obstinación de la joven por seguir adelante con su compromiso, pero casi había estado a punto de romper su amistad. Entre ellos no volvieron a hacer jamás referencia a la opinión que Ralph tenía de Gilbert Osmond y, al rodear ese tema de un sacrosanto silencio, consiguieron mantener la apariencia de que existía una sinceridad recíproca entre ambos. Pero había una diferencia, como Ralph se decía a menudo, por supuesto que la había. Ella no le había perdonado y nunca lo haría: eso era lo único que Ralph había sacado de todo aquello. Isabel pensaba que lo había perdonado y estaba convencida de que no le había molestado que le dijera esas cosas y, como era tan generosa como orgullosa, esas convicciones representaban para ella una firme certeza. Pero, estuviese justificado o no por el hecho del que se trataba, él prácticamente la había ofendido, y además se trataba de una ofensa del tipo que las mujeres nunca olvidan. En su condición de esposa de Osmond, Isabel nunca podría volver a ser su amiga. Si con esa persona disfrutaba de la felicidad que esperaba, solo podría sentir desprecio por el hombre que de antemano había intentado minar tan grata bendición; y si, por el contrario, la advertencia de él demostrara estar justificada, el juramento hecho por Isabel de que Ralph nunca lo sabría le supondría tal peso sobre su estado de ánimo que terminaría por odiarle. Así de sombría había sido la previsión que había hecho Ralph del futuro durante el primer año de matrimonio de su prima y, si sus reflexiones llegasen a parecer morbosas, hemos de recordar que no gozaba de muy buena salud. Se consoló de la mejor forma que pudo comportándose (como consideró él mismo) con exquisitez cuando asistió a la ceremonia en la que Isabel se unió al señor Osmond, que tuvo lugar en Florencia en el mes de junio. Supo por su madre que en un principio Isabel había pensado celebrar sus esponsales en su tierra natal, pero como su prioridad era la sencillez por encima de todo finalmente había decidido, pese a las múltiples afirmaciones de Osmond de que estaba dispuesto a viajar a donde fuese, que la mejor forma de conseguir su deseo sería que los casara el clérigo más cercano lo antes posible. Así pues, la ceremonia tuvo lugar en la pequeña capilla americana en un día muy caluroso, con la única asistencia de la señora Touchett y su hijo, Pansy Osmond y la condesa Gemini. Tal austeridad en el evento que acabo de mencionar se debió en parte a la ausencia de dos personas que se podría haber supuesto que asistirían y que le habrían otorgado cierto relumbre. Madame Merle había sido invitada pero, ante la imposibilidad de abandonar Roma en esos momentos, mandó una gentil carta excusándose. Henrietta Stackpole no había sido invitada, ya que el viaje desde Estados Unidos que el señor Goodwood había anunciado a Isabel se había visto finalmente frustrado por exigencias de su profesión; pero había enviado una carta, menos gentil que la de madame Merle, dando a entender que, de haber podido cruzar el Atlántico, habría estado presente en la boda no solo como testigo, sino también como crítico. Su vuelta a Europa tuvo lugar algo más tarde, y Henrietta consiguió mantener una entrevista con Isabel en París durante el otoño, en la que se permitió hacer gala, quizá con demasiada libertad, de ese ingenio crítico suyo. El pobre Osmond, que fue el principal objeto del mismo, protestó con tanta acritud que Henrietta se vio obligada a declarar a Isabel que esta había dado un paso que había interpuesto una barrera entre ambas. «No se trata ni mucho menos de que te hayas casado, sino de que te hayas casado con él», consideró que era su obligación afirmar, con lo que, como se puede ver, estaba mucho más de acuerdo con Ralph Touchett de lo que ella misma creía, aunque sin tantas dudas ni reparos como este. No obstante, Henrietta no parecía haber hecho su segunda visita a Europa en balde, pues justo en el momento en que Osmond dijo solemnemente a Isabel que no tenía más remedio que oponerse a la presencia de esa mujer periodista, e Isabel le contestó que, en su opinión, estaba siendo demasiado duro con ella, apareció en escena el bueno del señor Bantling y propuso que hiciesen un viaje a España. Las crónicas que Henrietta había enviado desde allí eran las más satisfactorias que había publicado hasta la fecha, y había una en particular, escrita en la Alhambra y titulada «Moros a la luz de la luna», que era considerada por todos su obra maestra. Isabel quedó en secreto decepcionada por el hecho de que su marido no fuese capaz de

tomarse a la pobre chica en broma. Hasta llegó a preguntarse si su sentido de la diversión, o de lo divertido —que al fin y al cabo constituían su sentido del humor, ¿no?—, no sería por casualidad un tanto defectuoso. Por supuesto, ella misma veía el asunto desde la perspectiva de una persona en cuya felicidad presente no podía hacer mella la conciencia ofendida de Henrietta. Osmond pensaba que la alianza de ambas era una especie de monstruosidad, ya que no veía por ningún lado qué podían tener en común. Para él, la compañera de viajes turísticos del señor Bantling era sencillamente la mujer más vulgar del mundo, así como la más disoluta. Isabel apeló contra esa última parte del veredicto con tanto ardor que él se sorprendió una vez más de lo raros que eran algunos de los gustos de su esposa. Isabel solo lo pudo explicar afirmando que le gustaba conocer gente lo más distinta a ella que fuera posible. «En ese caso, ¿por qué no te haces amiga de la lavandera?», le preguntó Osmond, a lo que Isabel respondió que mucho se temía que la lavandera no tuviese el menor interés en ella. En cambio, Henrietta sí se interesaba mucho.

Ralph no la había visto durante la mayor parte de los dos años que habían seguido a su matrimonio. El invierno que Isabel comenzó a residir en Roma, él lo volvió a pasar en San Remo, donde se le unió su madre en primavera, para después regresar los dos a Inglaterra a inspeccionar lo que estaban haciendo en el banco… una operación que la señora Touchett no consiguió convencer a su hijo de que realizase. Ralph había arrendado la casa en la que vivía en San Remo, una pequeña villa que volvió a ocupar al invierno siguiente, pero a finales del mes de abril de ese segundo año se trasladó a Roma. Era la primera vez desde su matrimonio que se veía cara a cara con Isabel, algo que por entonces deseaba con todas sus fuerzas. Ella le había escrito de vez en cuando, pero sus cartas no le decían nada de lo que quería saber. Ralph había preguntado a su madre cómo le iba la vida a Isabel, y aquella se había limitado a contestarle que suponía que le iría estupendamente. La imaginación de la señora Touchett no era de las que comulgan con lo que no se ve, y ahora no presumía de intimidad con su sobrina, con la que apenas se trataba. La joven parecía vivir de forma bastante digna, pero la señora Touchett seguía siendo de la opinión de que había hecho un matrimonio desastroso. No encontraba ninguna satisfacción en pensar en la actual situación de Isabel, y estaba convencida de que se trataba de un asunto lamentable. De vez en cuando se encontraba con la condesa Gemini en Florencia, pero siempre intentaba que el contacto fuera lo menor posible, ya que la condesa le recordaba a Osmond, el cual a su vez le hacía pensar en Isabel. Esos días se hablaba menos de la condesa, pero para la señora Touchett eso tampoco auguraba nada bueno, puesto que solo venía a confirmar que se había hablado mucho de ella con anterioridad. Tenía una referencia más directa de Isabel en la persona de madame Merle, pero las relaciones de esta con la señora Touchett habían sufrido un cambio sustancial. La tía de Isabel le había dicho sin rodeos que había jugado un papel muy ingenioso en la boda de aquella, y madame Merle, que nunca discutía con nadie, que parecía pensar que no había nadie que lo mereciera, y que llevaba varios años obrando, como quien dice, el milagro de vivir… con la señora Touchett sin mostrar síntoma alguno de irritación, en esa ocasión adoptó un tono de voz muy elevado y afirmó que se trataba de una acusación contra la que no pensaba rebajarse para defenderse. No obstante, añadió (sin rebajarse) que su comportamiento había sido muy sencillo, que solo había creído lo que había visto con sus propios ojos, y lo que había visto era que Isabel no tenía muchas ganas de casarse y que Osmond (cuyas continuas visitas no significaban nada, sino tan solo que se moría de aburrimiento en lo alto de su colina e iba simplemente para entretenerse) tampoco tenía muchas ganas de complacer a nadie. Isabel se había guardado sus sentimientos para sí, y el viaje a Grecia y Egipto no había sido más que una cortina de humo a ojos de su compañera. Madame Merle aceptó el hecho y no estaba dispuesta a considerarlo escandaloso, pero de ahí a decir que ella hubiera formado parte del mismo, con doblez o sin ella, era una imputación contra la que manifestaba su más enérgica protesta. Sin duda fue como consecuencia de esa actitud de la señora Touchett, y de la herida que infligió a unas costumbres consagradas por tantas deliciosas temporadas, por lo que después de eso madame Merle decidió permanecer durante bastantes meses en Inglaterra, donde su reputación seguía siendo inmaculada. La señora Touchett la había ofendido, y hay cosas que no se pueden perdonar. Pero madame Merle sufría en silencio, y siempre había algo exquisito en su dignidad.

Como digo, Ralph Touchett quería comprobar las cosas por sí mismo, pero mientras acometía tal empresa volvía a percatarse de lo necio que había sido al poner a su prima sobre aviso. Había jugado mal sus cartas y había perdido la partida. Ni vería ni se enteraría de nada, pues Isabel nunca se quitaría la máscara ante él. Lo que tendría que haber hecho era manifestar que estaba entusiasmado con la unión, y así luego, cuando se viniera todo abajo, como decía el propio Ralph, Isabel podría darse el gusto de decirle que había sido un mentecato. Él habría estado encantado de pasar por un mentecato con tal de enterarse de la verdadera situación de su prima. En esos momentos, sin embargo, ni ella se burlaba de él por sus falacias ni simulaba que su propia confianza hubiese estado justificada; si tenía puesta

una máscara, esta le cubría el rostro por completo. Había algo inmutable y mecánico en la serenidad que llevaba pintada sobre ella; para Ralph no era una expresión, sino más bien una representación, incluso un anuncio. Isabel había perdido el hijo que esperaba; era una gran pena, pero de la que ella apenas hablaba, pues sin duda había mucho más que decir sobre el tema de lo que nunca podría decir a Ralph. Además, ya pertenecía al pasado; había ocurrido seis meses antes y ella ya se había despojado de toda señal de luto. Isabel parecía llevar una vida privilegiada, y Ralph había oído decir de ella que ocupaba una «posición fascinante». Observó que Isabel producía la impresión de ser alguien envidiable, y que para mucha gente era un privilegio el hecho de conocerla. Su casa no estaba abierta a todo el mundo, y celebraba una velada una vez por semana a la que no todo el mundo estaba invitado. Vivía con cierta magnificencia, pero tenías que ser miembro de su círculo para advertirlo, pues no había nada ostentoso, criticable, ni tan siquiera admirable, en la vida cotidiana del señor y la señora Osmond. Ralph reconocía en todo eso la mano de él, pues sabía que Isabel no tenía habilidad para producir impresiones estudiadas. Le sorprendió comprobar que su prima mostraba una gran afición al movimiento, la alegría, el trasnochar, a dar largos paseos, a fatigarse; parecía ansiar divertirse, interesarse, incluso aburrirse, hacer nuevas amistades, conocer a personas de las que se hablaba, explorar los alrededores de Roma, entablar relación con algunas de las reliquias más rancias de su vieja sociedad. En todo ello había mucha menos discriminación que en aquel deseo de desarrollo global de sí misma contra el que Ralph solía ejercitar su ingenio en el pasado. Había una especie de violencia en algunos de los impulsos de Isabel, incluso de tosquedad en algunos de sus experimentos, que le resultaban sorprendentes. Hasta le parecía que hablaba, se movía y respiraba más deprisa que antes de casarse. Sin duda Isabel había caído en ciertas exageraciones… ella, que antes se preocupaba tanto por la verdad pura, y mientras que en el pasado le gustaban mucho las discusiones amistosas y el juego intelectual (nunca estaba tan encantadora como cuando, en el cordial ardor de la disputa, recibía un demoledor golpe argumental en plena cara y lo apartaba de ella como si fuese una pluma), ahora parecía pensar que no había nada con lo que mereciese la pena estar de acuerdo o diferir. Antaño sentía curiosidad, ahora indiferencia; y sin embargo, pese a esa misma indiferencia, Isabel estaba más activa que nunca. Todavía esbelta, y aún más hermosa que antes, su aspecto no presentaba grandes señales de madurez, y había un esmero y un esplendor en su arreglo personal que daba un toque de insolencia a su belleza. Pero algo obsesionaba a la pobre y bondadosa Isabel. Su ágil paso arrastraba una masa de ropajes tras de sí, y su inteligente cabeza sostenía una serie de majestuosos ornamentos. La joven libre y perspicaz se había convertido en otra persona bien distinta, y a quien veía Ralph era a la distinguida dama que se suponía que representaba algo. Ralph se preguntó qué era lo que representaba Isabel, y solo pudo responderse que representaba a Gilbert Osmond. «¡Por Dios, vaya función!», exclamó entonces apesadumbrado, mientras se sumía profundamente en el misterio insondable de las cosas.

Como digo, Ralph reconocía la mano de Osmond a cada momento. Veía que este lo controlaba todo, que ajustaba, regulaba y animaba el estilo de vida de ambos. Osmond estaba en su elemento; por fin tenía material con que trabajar. Siempre pretendía crear un efecto, y sus efectos estaban minuciosamente calculados. No los producía de forma vulgar, pero el motivo era tan vulgar como grande era el arte. Rodear su interior de una especie de odiosa santidad, atormentar a la sociedad haciéndola sentirse excluida, hacer que los demás creyeran que su casa era diferente a cualquier otra, mostrar al mundo con descaro su cínica originalidad; esa era la ingeniosa intención del personaje al que Isabel había atribuido una moral superior. «Trabaja con un material superior —se dijo Ralph—, pues ahora dispone de mayores y más ricos recursos que antes.» Ralph se consideraba inteligente, pero nunca lo había sido tanto como cuando se dio cuenta *in petto* de que, pese a esa apariencia de preocuparse solo por los valores intrínsecos, en realidad Osmond vivía exclusivamente para el mundo. Lejos de ser su amo como fingía, era su humilde servidor, y su éxito dependía del grado de atención que aquel le prestara. Vivía pendiente del mundo de la mañana a la noche, el mundo era tan estúpido que no se daba cuenta de su ardid. Todo lo que hacía Osmond era una pose, tan sutilmente meditada que, a menos que uno estuviese alerta, la confundía con un impulso. Ralph nunca había conocido a nadie cuya vida estuviese tan calculada. Sus gustos, estudios, logros, colecciones, todo tenía un propósito. Su vida en la colina de Florencia había sido durante años una actitud estudiada. Su soledad, su hastío, el amor por su hija, sus buenos y malos modales, eran rasgos de una imagen mental que siempre tenía presente como modelo de impertinencia y mistificación. Su ambición no era complacer al mundo, sino complacerse a sí mismo provocando la curiosidad de aquel, para luego negarse a satisfacerla. Siempre se había sentido importante embaucando a los demás. Lo más grande que había hecho en la vida por complacerse a sí mismo era casarse con la señorita Archer, aunque en ese caso el crédulo mundo estaba encarnado en cierto modo en la propia Isabel, que había sido embaucada por completo. Por supuesto, Ralph consideró que lo justo era ser coherente, por lo que, una vez abrazado ese credo por el

que tanto había sufrido, no podía abandonarlo. He hecho este pequeño esbozo de los artículos de dicho credo por la importancia que pudieron tener en su momento. Pero estaba claro que Ralph tenía mucha habilidad para hacer que los hechos encajasen con su teoría… incluido el de que, durante el mes que pasó en Roma, el marido de la mujer a la que tanto quería no pareció considerarlo en lo más mínimo un enemigo.

Para Gilbert Osmond, Ralph ya no era importante. No era que hubiese pasado a tener la importancia de un amigo, sino que no tenía ninguna en absoluto. Era el primo de Isabel y estaba enfermo de un modo más bien desagradable, y eso era lo único en lo que se basaba Osmond para tratar con él. Le hacía las preguntas pertinentes: se interesaba por su salud y por la señora Touchett, por su opinión sobre los climas invernales y por si estaba cómodo en su hotel. En las pocas ocasiones en que se vieron, nunca le dirigió una palabra que no fuese necesaria, pero su actitud siempre estaba imbuida de la urbanidad de quien se sabe triunfador frente a quien se siente fracasado. Por todo eso, Ralph tuvo hacia el final la aguda intuición de que Osmond no iba a facilitar a su esposa que siguiera recibiendo al señor Touchett. No era que estuviese celoso: no tenía esa excusa, ya que nadie podía sentir celos de Ralph. Pero sí que quería que Isabel pagase por el cariño que siempre le había profesado y del que todavía le quedaba mucho, y, como Ralph no pretendía que Isabel tuviese que pagar demasiado por él, en cuanto su sospecha se hizo más intensa se quitó de en medio. Al hacerlo, privó a Isabel de una ocupación muy interesante: esta no dejaba de preguntarse qué elevado principio era el que mantenía a Ralph con vida. Había decidido que se trataba de su amor por la conversación, que en esos momentos era más ingeniosa que nunca. Ralph había dejado de dar paseos, y ya no era el caminante divertido de antaño. Se pasaba el día sentado en una butaca, casi cualquiera podía servir, y dependía tanto de lo que uno pudiese hacer por él que, de no haber sido su charla tan contemplativa, se podría haber llegado a pensar que era ciego. Como el lector ya sabe más de él de lo que Isabel llegaría a saber jamás, podemos darle la clave del misterio. Lo que mantenía a Ralph con vida era sencillamente el hecho de que todavía no había visto bastante de la persona que más le interesaba del mundo, por lo que todavía no estaba satisfecho. Iban a pasar más cosas, y no se resignaba a perdérselas. Quería ver lo que iba a ser de Isabel con su marido, o lo que iba a ser de este con ella. Ese era solo el primer acto del drama, y Ralph estaba decidido a ver la representación hasta el final. Su determinación le había mantenido, le había dado fuerzas para resistir dieciocho meses más hasta volver a Roma con lord Warburton. De hecho, le había dado tal aire de tener intención de vivir indefinidamente que la señora Touchett, aunque más proclive que nunca a confundirse con respecto a ese extraño hijo suyo que tan pocas alegrías le daba —las mismas que ella a él—, no había tenido el menor reparo, como ya sabemos, en embarcarse rumbo a tierras lejanas. Si a Ralph lo había mantenido vivo el suspense, fue con muy parecida emoción —la ansiedad por saber en qué estado lo encontraría— con la que Isabel subió a verlo a su habitación al día siguiente de que lord Warburton le comunicara que había llegado a Roma.

Pasó una hora con él, en la que fue la primera de varias visitas. Gilbert Osmond iba a verlo con regularidad y, como le enviaban el carruaje, Ralph fue en más de una ocasión al palazzo Roccanera. Transcurrió así una quincena, al término de la cual Ralph anunció a lord Warburton que creía que al final no iría a Sicilia. Los dos habían cenado juntos después de que el segundo hubiese pasado todo el día recorriendo la Campania. Ya se habían levantado de la mesa, y Warburton estaba delante de la chimenea encendiéndose un puro, que de inmediato se quitó de los labios.

—¿Que no vas a ir a Sicilia? ¿Y adónde vas a ir entonces?

—Pues creo que a ningún sitio —contestó Ralph desde el sofá sin el menor rubor.

—¿Quieres decir que te vuelves a Inglaterra?

—No, no, me quedo en Roma.

—Roma no te conviene. Hace demasiado frío.

—Pues me tiene que convenir. Ya me encargaré yo de que me convenga. Mira lo bien que estoy ahora.

Lord Warburton lo contempló durante un momento mientras daba chupadas al puro, como si de verdad intentara comprobar el estado del joven.

—Sin duda estás mejor que durante el viaje. Todavía me pregunto cómo has podido resistirlo. Pero no estoy tan seguro de tu estado, así que te recomiendo que intentes ir a Sicilia.

—No pienso hacerlo —dijo el pobre Ralph—. Ya no puedo seguir intentándolo. No me puedo mover más, ni tengo fuerzas para semejante viaje. ¡Figúrate, yo entre Escila y Caribdis! No quiero morir en las llanuras sicilianas, para que me rapten y me arrastren a las sombras plutonianas, como le ocurrió a Proserpina en ese mismo lugar.

—Entonces, ¿para qué demonios has venido? —le preguntó su señoría.

—Porque me gustaba la idea, pero ahora veo que no serviría de nada. Ya da igual donde esté. He agotado todos los

remedios y probado todos los climas. Aquí estoy y aquí me quedo. No tengo ninguna prima en Sicilia, y mucho menos una casada.

—Comprendo que tu prima sea un aliciente para quedarte, pero ¿qué dice el médico?

—No se lo he consultado, y además me importa un comino. Si me muero aquí, la señora Osmond se encargará de enterrarme. De todas formas, no voy a morirme aquí.

—Eso espero —dijo lord Warburton mientras seguía fumando con aire pensativo—. Bueno, la verdad es que he de reconocer que me alegro mucho de que no insistas en ir a Sicilia, porque me aterrorizaba tener que hacer ese viaje.

—Pero no tenías por qué preocuparte, dado que no pretendía arrastrarte conmigo.

—No esperarías que te dejase ir solo.

—Mi querido Warburton, nunca he contado con que me acompañaras más allá de Roma —afirmó Ralph.

—Tendría que haberte llevado y dejarte allí instalado —dijo el otro.

—Eres muy buen cristiano y muy amable.

—Y después me habría vuelto aquí.

—Para a continuación irte a Inglaterra.

—No, no, me habría quedado en Roma.

—Pues en ese caso, si es lo que los dos queremos, no veo qué pinta Sicilia en todo esto —dijo Ralph.

Su interlocutor se quedó en silencio mientras contemplaba el fuego, y luego levantó la cabeza para decir de repente:

—Contéstame a una cosa. ¿Querías ir de verdad a Sicilia cuando empezamos el viaje?

—¡Ah!, *vous m'en demandez trop!* Permíteme que te haga yo otra pregunta primero. ¿Has venido conmigo… de forma platónica?

—No te entiendo. Quería venir al extranjero.

—Vaya, vaya, me parece que los dos teníamos nuestros motivos secretos.

—Habla por ti. Yo nunca he negado que quisiera pasar una temporada aquí.

—Sí, recuerdo que dijiste que querías ver al ministro de Asuntos Exteriores.

—Y lo he visto tres veces. Es un hombre muy divertido.

—Pero creo que has olvidado a qué viniste en realidad —dijo Ralph.

—Puede que sí —contestó lord Warburton en tono bastante serio. Ambos caballeros, pertenecientes a una raza que no se distingue por su falta de reserva, habían viajado juntos de Londres a Roma sin hacer la menor alusión a las cuestiones que más preocupaban a los dos. Había un viejo asunto del que antes hablaban en alguna ocasión, pero al que parecían haber dejado de prestar la atención requerida, e incluso una vez en Roma, donde muchas cosas apuntaban hacia él, seguían manteniendo el mismo silencio medio receloso, medio confiado—. De todos modos, te recomiendo que le pidas al médico su consentimiento —continuó de pronto lord Warburton tras una pausa.

—El consentimiento del médico lo estropearía todo. Nunca se lo pido si puedo evitarlo.

—¿Y qué opina la señora Osmond? —le preguntó su amigo.

—No se lo he dicho. Supongo que dirá que en Roma hace demasiado frío y hasta se ofrecerá a acompañarme a Catania. Es muy capaz de hacerlo.

—Si yo estuviera en tu lugar, eso me gustaría mucho.

—Pero a su marido no le gustaría nada.

—Sí, ya me lo imagino, pero no creo que te deba importar mucho lo que a él le guste o no. Es asunto suyo.

—No quiero provocar más conflictos entre ellos —dijo Ralph.

—¿Es que ya los hay?

—El terreno está totalmente abonado. Si ella se fuera conmigo la cosa estallaría. A Osmond no le agrada el primo de su esposa.

—Entonces sería normal que le montase algún escándalo. Pero ¿no se lo montará también si te quedas?

—Eso es lo que quiero comprobar. Ya le montó uno la última vez que estuve en Roma, y entonces consideré que mi obligación era desaparecer. Pero ahora creo que mi obligación es quedarme a defenderla.

—Mi querido Touchett, ¡tus poderes defensivos…! —comenzó a decir lord Warburton con una sonrisa, pero entonces vio algo en la expresión del otro que hizo que se contuviese—. Tu obligación, dadas las circunstancias, me parece una cuestión muy delicada —comentó en su lugar.

Durante un breve intervalo Ralph no dijo nada.

—Es cierto que mis poderes defensivos son pequeños —replicó al fin—, pero como los agresivos son aún menores, puede que Osmond no me crea digno de su artillería. De todos modos —añadió—, tengo curiosidad por ver algunas cosas.

—¿Estás sacrificando tu salud por tu curiosidad?

—No me interesa mucho mi salud, mientras que la señora Osmond me interesa muchísimo.

—A mí también. Pero no del modo en que me interesó en su momento —se apresuró a añadir lord Warburton.

Era una de las alusiones que hasta ese momento todavía no había tenido ocasión de hacer.

—¿Te parece que es feliz? —le preguntó Ralph, envalentonado por esa confidencia del otro.

—Pues no lo sé, apenas he pensado en ello. La otra noche me dijo que lo era.

—Y, cómo no, te lo dijo precisamente a ti —exclamó Ralph con una sonrisa.

—Tampoco sé por qué. Me veo más como la clase de persona a la que ella iría a lamentarse.

—¿A lamentarse? Ella nunca se lamentará de nada. Ha hecho lo que ha hecho y es muy consciente de ello. Y tú serías la última persona a la que iría a lamentarse de nada. Tiene mucho cuidado para esas cosas.

—Pues no hace falta que lo tenga. No pretendo volver a cortejarla.

—Me alegra oírlo. Así al menos no hay duda de cuál es tu obligación.

—No —dijo lord Warburton muy serio—, ninguna.

—Permíteme una pregunta —prosiguió Ralph—. ¿Es para dejar claro que no quieres volver a cortejarla por lo que te muestras tan atento con la señorita Osmond?

Lord Warburton dio un ligero respingo, tras lo que se levantó y se detuvo ante el fuego, en el que fijó la mirada.

—¿Te parece ridículo?

—¿Ridículo? En absoluto, si de verdad te gusta.

—Creo que es una muchacha deliciosa. No creo que una joven de esa edad me haya agradado tanto nunca.

—Es una criatura encantadora. Ella al menos sí que es auténtica.

—Claro que está la diferencia de edad. Nos llevamos más de veinte años.

—Mi querido Warburton —dijo Ralph—, ¿vas en serio de verdad?

—Totalmente… al menos de momento.

—Me alegro mucho. ¡Santo cielo, qué contento se va a poner el bueno de Osmond! —exclamó Ralph.

Su interlocutor frunció el ceño.

—No lo estropees, por favor. No me declararía a su hija para complacerle a él.

—Pero él tendrá la perversidad de alegrarse de todas formas.

—No me aprecia tanto como para eso —alegó su señoría.

—¿Cómo que no? Mi querido Warburton, el inconveniente de tu posición es que no hace falta que la gente te aprecie en absoluto para que deseen emparentar contigo. Si yo estuviera en tu lugar, siempre tendría la feliz convicción de que todo el mundo me amaba.

Lord Warburton no parecía tener muchas ganas de contemplar los axiomas generales, ya que estaba pensando en un caso en concreto.

—¿Crees que a ella le gustaría?

—¿A la joven? Seguro que le encantaría.

—No, no, me refiero a la señora Osmond.

Ralph lo miró un momento.

—Mi querido amigo, ¿y qué tiene ella que ver?

—Cuanto desee. Aprecia mucho a la joven.

—Cierto, cierto. —Ralph se levantó lentamente—. Es una cuestión muy interesante… ver hasta dónde sería capaz de llegar por el aprecio que siente por Pansy. —Se quedó un instante con las manos en los bolsillos y el ceño bastante sombrío—. Espero que estés… bueno, muy seguro. ¡Demonios! —exclamó—. No sé cómo decirlo.

—Sí que lo sabes. Siempre sabes cómo decir las cosas.

—Es que… resulta embarazoso. Espero que estés seguro de que, entre los méritos de la señorita Osmond, uno de los principales no sea el de estar tan unida a su madrastra…

—¡Por todos los santos, Touchett! —gritó lord Warburton enfadado—. ¿Por quién me tomas?

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Isabel no había visto mucho a madame Merle desde que se había casado, ya que la dama se había dado el gusto de ausentarse de Roma con frecuencia. Una de las veces había estado seis meses en Inglaterra, mientras que otra había pasado parte de un invierno en París. También había hecho numerosas visitas a amigos que vivían lejos, con lo cual estaba dando su aprobación tácita a la idea de que, en adelante, sería una romana menos inveterada de lo que lo había sido en el pasado. Como hasta entonces lo había sido únicamente en el sentido de mantener siempre abierto un apartamento en uno de los rincones más soleados de la colina de Pincio, el cual ahora estaba a menudo vacío, parecía bastante probable que su ausencia fuese a ser casi constante, peligro que durante algún tiempo Isabel se había sentido inclinada a lamentar. La familiaridad había modificado hasta cierto punto su primera impresión de madame Merle, pero en esencia no la había alterado, ya que todavía despertaba en ella sorpresa y admiración. La dama era todo un personaje, armada por los cuatro costados. Era un placer ver a alguien tan perfectamente pertrechado para la batalla social. Portaba su estandarte con discreción, pero usaba sus armas, de acero pulido, con una pericia que a Isabel se le antojaba cada vez más propia de una veterana. Nunca se cansaba ni se rendía a la desazón, y nunca parecía necesitar descanso ni consuelo. Tenía sus propias ideas, muchas de las cuales había expuesto en el pasado a Isabel, la cual sabía además que, bajo esa apariencia de riguroso autocontrol, su refinada amiga escondía una profunda sensibilidad. Pero era su voluntad la que regía su vida, y había algo hasta gallardo en la forma en que avanzaba por la misma. Era como si hubiese descubierto su secreto… como si el arte de vivir fuese algún truco que hubiera conseguido adivinar. Isabel, conforme se hacía mayor, iba conociendo los aspectos de la vida más repugnantes, deleznables; había días en que el mundo le parecía muy negro, y se preguntaba con cierta acritud por el sentido de su existencia. Antaño su costumbre había sido vivir con entusiasmo, enamorarse de posibilidades que percibía de repente, o de la idea de experimentar una nueva aventura. De más joven solía pasar de un pequeño momento de exaltación a otro, sin que apenas hubiera intervalos aburridos entre ellos. Sin embargo, madame Merle había suprimido todo entusiasmo y ya no se apasionaba por nada, sino que vivía por completo de acuerdo con lo que le dictaban la razón y la sabiduría. Había momentos en los que Isabel habría dado cualquier cosa por ser instruida en ese arte, y de haber tenido cerca a su brillante amiga así se lo habría pedido. Se había dado cuenta con más claridad que nunca de la ventaja de ser así: de haberse convertido en una superficie sólida, de haberse recubierto de una especie de armadura plateada.

Pero, como digo, no fue hasta el invierno durante el que acabamos de retomar el contacto con nuestra heroína cuando el personaje en cuestión volvió a pasar una larga estancia en Roma. Isabel la veía más de lo que lo había hecho desde su matrimonio, pero para entonces sus necesidades e inclinaciones habían cambiado considerablemente. Ya no habría acudido a madame Merle en busca de instrucción, pues ya no sentía el deseo de conocer el inteligente truco de esa dama. Si tenía problemas, debía guardárselos para sí, y, si la vida era difícil, no lo sería menos por confesarse derrotada. Sin duda madame Merle se prestaba un gran servicio a sí misma y podía adornar cualquier círculo social; pero ¿era —sería— de utilidad para los demás en momentos de delicada confusión? Isabel siempre había pensado que la mejor forma de aprender de su amiga era imitándola, siendo tan firme y brillante como ella. Madame Merle era inasequible a la confusión, e Isabel, tras considerar ese hecho, decidió por enésima vez librarse de las suyas propias. También le pareció, al renovar ese contacto que había estado prácticamente interrumpido durante algún tiempo, que su vieja aliada se comportaba de forma diferente, casi distante, exagerando cierto miedo un tanto artificial a resultar indiscreta. Como sabemos, Ralph Touchett era de la opinión de que madame Merle tenía tendencia a la exageración, a forzar la nota; en términos vulgares, a pasarse de la raya. Isabel nunca había aceptado dicha acusación, y de hecho nunca la había llegado a entender del todo; para ella, el comportamiento de madame Merle siempre portaba el sello del buen gusto, siempre era «discreto». Pero en lo que se refería a la cuestión de no querer entrometerse en la vida íntima de la familia Osmond, nuestra joven terminó por concluir que sí que se pasaba un poco de la raya. Y eso, por supuesto, no era de muy buen gusto, sino que resultaba bastante violento. Madame Merle recordaba con demasiada frecuencia que Isabel estaba casada y que ahora tenía otros intereses; y que aunque ella, madame Merle, conocía a Gilbert Osmond y a la pequeña Pansy muy bien, quizá mejor que nadie, no pertenecía al fin y al cabo a su círculo íntimo. Siempre estaba en guardia y nunca hablaba de los asuntos de los Osmond a menos

que se lo pidiesen o casi obligasen, como cuando necesitaban su opinión. Tenía miedo a dar la impresión de que se entrometía en sus vidas. Sabemos que madame Merle era sincera, y un día expresó con toda sinceridad ese miedo a Isabel:

—Tengo que estar en guardia —le dijo—, porque podría ofenderte con mucha facilidad y sin ni siquiera darme cuenta. Tendrías todo el derecho a ofenderte, aunque mis intenciones hubieran sido las más puras. No me olvido de que conozco a tu marido desde mucho antes que tú, y no puedo dejar que eso me traicione. Si fueras una mujer tonta podrías ponerte celosa. Sé perfectamente que no lo eres, pero yo tampoco lo soy, así que estoy decidida a no meterme en líos. No cuesta nada hacer daño, y antes de que uno se dé cuenta ya puede haber cometido un error. Por supuesto, si hubiese querido tener un romance con tu marido, ya dispuse de diez años para tenerlo y nada que lo impidiera, así que no es muy probable que vaya a empezar ahora, que soy mucho menos atractiva que antes. Pero si te enojara pareciendo querer ocupar un lugar que no me corresponde, no te harías tales reflexiones, sino que sencillamente dirías que me estaba olvidando de ciertas diferencias. Y te aseguro que no estoy dispuesta a olvidarlas. Sin duda una buena amiga está siempre pensando en esas cosas; no solemos sospechar que nuestros amigos estén obrando injustamente. No tengo la menor sospecha de ti, querida mía, pero sí la tengo de la naturaleza humana. No creas que me resulta tan incómodo, porque no estoy siempre vigilándome, como creo que demuestra el hecho de que te esté hablando ahora de este modo. Aun así, lo único que quiero decir es que, si alguna vez llegaras a sentir celos de mí (pues esa sería la forma que adoptarían tus sospechas), yo seguramente pensaría que tendría algo de culpa. Desde luego, no sería culpa de tu marido.

Isabel había tenido tres años para meditar sobre la teoría de la señora Touchett de que madame Merle había arreglado el matrimonio de Osmond. Ya sabemos cómo se lo había tomado al principio. Madame Merle podría haber arreglado el matrimonio de Gilbert Osmond, pero desde luego no el de Isabel Archer. Este había sido obra de… Isabel apenas sabía de qué: de la naturaleza, de la providencia, de la fortuna, del eterno misterio de las cosas. Cierto era que la queja de su tía no se había referido tanto a la actividad de madame Merle como a su duplicidad: ella había propiciado aquel extraño acontecimiento, para luego negar su culpabilidad. Para Isabel dicha culpabilidad no habría sido muy grave, ya que no le parecía un crimen que madame Merle fuese la causante de la amistad más importante que había forjado jamás. Había pensado eso justo antes de su matrimonio, después de aquella pequeña discusión con su tía y en un momento en el que todavía era capaz de registrar sus emociones, casi con el tono de un historiador filosófico, en sus escasos y jóvenes anales. Si madame Merle se había propuesto que cambiase de estado, lo único que podía decir es que había sido una idea muy afortunada. Además, siempre la había tratado con mucha sinceridad, y nunca le había ocultado el gran aprecio que sentía por Gilbert Osmond. Después de su enlace, Isabel descubrió que su marido albergaba un punto de vista menos amable al respecto, y en sus conversaciones rara vez consentía en pasar esa cuenta, la más redonda y suave del rosario social de ambos.

—¿Es que no te gusta madame Merle? —le había preguntado Isabel en una ocasión—. Ella tiene un gran concepto de ti.

—Te lo voy a decir de una vez por todas —respondió Osmond—. Antes me gustaba más que ahora. Estoy cansado de ella, aunque me avergüence decirlo. ¡Es tan buena que casi no parece real! Me alegro de que no esté en Italia, porque así se puede uno relajar, como si fuera una especie de *détente* moral. No hables mucho de ella, no sea que vuelva. Terminará volviendo, pero espero que dentro de mucho tiempo.

De hecho, madame Merle había vuelto antes de que fuera demasiado tarde… es decir, demasiado tarde para recuperar cualquier ventaja que hubiese podido perder. Pero si, tal y como he dicho antes, había cambiado de forma considerable, los sentimientos de Isabel tampoco eran exactamente los mismos. Percibía la situación con la misma agudeza de antes, pero le resultaba mucho menos satisfactoria. Por mucho que pueda echar en falta otras cosas, una mente insatisfecha nunca carece de razones: florecen tan espesas como los ranúnculos en junio. El hecho de que madame Merle hubiese tenido algo que ver en el matrimonio de Gilbert Osmond dejó de ser uno de sus temas de reflexión; al fin y al cabo, podría decirse que no tenía tanto que agradecerle. Conforme transcurría el tiempo cada vez tenía menos, e Isabel llegó a pensar en cierta ocasión que tal vez, de no intervenir madame Merle, nada de aquello habría ocurrido. De inmediato reprimió dicho pensamiento y se horrorizó de haberlo tenido. «Me ocurra lo que me ocurra no debo ser injusta —se dijo—, he de soportar yo misma mi carga y no endosársela a los demás.» Esa disposición se vio puesta a prueba al cabo de algún tiempo por aquella ingeniosa disculpa de su conducta presente que madame Merle consideró oportuno darle, y de la que acabo de presentar un esbozo, pues había algo irritante, casi burlón, en esas nítidas distinciones y claras convicciones suyas. Ese día no había nada claro en la mente de

Isabel, y en ella se agolpaban confusas lamentaciones y complicados miedos. Se sentía impotente cuando se separó de su amiga después de haberle hecho las afirmaciones que he citado. ¡Qué poco sabía madame Merle de lo que ella estaba pensando! Claro que ni ella misma era capaz de explicarlo. ¿Celos de ella, celos por Gilbert? En esos momentos tal idea le parecía muy irreal. Casi deseó que le hubiera sido posible sentir celos, pues en cierto modo habría sido una forma de alivio. Al fin y al cabo, se suponía que los celos eran uno de los síntomas de ser feliz. Aun así, madame Merle era sabia, tanto que podría haber estado pretendiendo que conocía a Isabel mejor que la propia Isabel. Esta joven siempre había sido muy fecunda a la hora de tomar resoluciones, muchas de ellas de carácter elevado, pero en ningún momento habían florecido en la intimidad de su ser con tanta fertilidad como ese día. Es cierto que todas se parecían bastante, y podrían resumirse en la determinación de que, si había de ser desdichada, no sería por su propia culpa. Su pobre espíritu alado siempre había sentido el gran deseo de obrar lo mejor posible, y hasta el momento nada había logrado desalentarla seriamente. En consecuencia, quería seguir siendo justa y no degradarse con venganzas mezquinas. Relacionar a madame Merle con su decepción sería una venganza mezquina, sobre todo porque la satisfacción que derivaría de hacerlo sería totalmente falsa. Podría alimentar su amargura, pero no la libraría de sus ataduras. Era imposible fingir que no había actuado con los ojos bien abiertos, pues si alguna vez había habido una joven libre esa era ella. Sin duda una joven enamorada no era libre, pero la única causa de su error había sido ella misma. No había habido conjura ni trampa alguna; solo ella había observado, meditado y elegido. Cuando una mujer cometía un error tal, solo había una forma de arreglarlo: aceptarlo en la misma proporción y con la mayor grandeza posible. Cometer una locura ya era suficiente, sobre todo tratándose de una que iba a durar toda la vida, y una segunda no iba a arreglar nada. Ese voto de reticencia tenía cierta nobleza que dio alientos a Isabel, pero aun así madame Merle había hecho muy bien en tomar las debidas precauciones.

Un día, alrededor de un mes después de que Ralph Touchett llegara a Roma, Isabel regresaba de dar un paseo con Pansy. No era solo porque fuera parte de su decisión primordial de ser justa por lo que en esos momentos estaba muy agradecida de tener a Pansy, sino que también formaba parte de su ternura por todo lo que era puro y débil. Quería mucho a Pansy, y no había nada más en su vida que fuese tan agradable como el apego que sentía por esa joven criatura, ni tan correcto como su propia claridad acerca del mismo. Era como una dulce presencia, como una pequeña mano sobre la suya. Por parte de Pansy no era solo mero afecto, sino una especie de fe ardiente y coercitiva; por la suya, ser consciente de la dependencia de la joven era más que una satisfacción, pues le servía como una razón a la que aferrarse cuando otros motivos amenazaban con fallarle. Isabel se había dicho en su momento que todos debíamos asumir nuestro deber allí donde se encuentre, y cumplirlo del mejor modo posible. El afecto de Pansy era una admonición directa que parecía decir que ahí tenía una oportunidad, tal vez no extraordinaria, pero sí inconfundible. No obstante, Isabel apenas sabría decir en qué consistía esa oportunidad; en general, para poder ser más para la muchacha de lo que esta podía ser para sí misma. Esos días Isabel podría haber sonreído al recordar que su pequeña acompañante le había parecido en su momento ambigua, pues ahora se daba cuenta de que las ambigüedades de Pansy se debían tan solo a su propia tosquedad de ideas. Había sido incapaz de creer que a nadie le pudiese importar tanto, tantísimo, complacer a los demás. Pero desde entonces había visto esa delicada facultad en acción, y ya sabía qué pensar al respecto. Constituía el mismo ser de la criatura: en cierto sentido, era su genio. Pansy no tenía ningún orgullo que pudiese interferir y, aunque no dejaba de ampliar sus conquistas, no creía que fuesen mérito suyo. Las dos estaban juntas constantemente, de manera que era raro ver a la señora Osmond sin su hijastra. A Isabel le gustaba su compañía, porque le producía el efecto de llevar un ramillete hecho todo de la misma flor, y se había convertido en un mandamiento para ella no desatender a Pansy bajo ningún concepto. La joven tenía aspecto de ser más feliz con Isabel que con nadie, a excepción de su padre, al que admiraba con una intensidad que estaba justificada por el hecho de que, como la paternidad era un exquisito placer para Gilbert Osmond, este siempre había sido muy atento y generoso con su hija. Isabel sabía que a Pansy le gustaba estar con ella y era consciente de hasta qué punto estudiaba la forma de complacerla. Había decidido que la mejor manera de conseguirlo era la negativa, es decir, no causarle ningún problema… una convicción que sin duda no tenía nada que ver con los problemas ya existentes. Así pues, se comportaba con una pasividad muy ingeniosa y con una docilidad casi imaginativa. Tenía cuidado hasta en moderar la avidez con la que asentía a las propuestas de Isabel, y que podría haber implicado la posibilidad de que ella pudiera desear otra cosa. Nunca interrumpía, nunca hacía preguntas de índole social y, aunque le encantaba recibir la aprobación de los demás, hasta el punto de palidecer cuando se la daban, nunca la pedía. Tan solo esperaba anhelante, una actitud que, conforme se fue haciendo mayor, hizo de sus ojos los más bonitos del mundo. Cuando, durante el segundo invierno en el palazzo Roccanera, comenzó a asistir a fiestas y a

bailes, era siempre ella la que, a una hora razonable, proponía que se marcharan, no fuera a ser que la señora Osmond se cansase. Isabel valoraba ese sacrificio de los últimos bailes por parte de Pansy, pues sabía que a su pequeña acompañante la apasionaba ese ejercicio, durante el que se movía al ritmo de la música como una concienzuda hada. Además, la vida social no presentaba inconvenientes para ella, e incluso le gustaban sus aspectos más fatigosos: el calor de los salones de baile, el aburrimiento de las cenas, las aglomeraciones en la puerta, la incómoda espera hasta que llegaba el carruaje. Durante el día, en ese vehículo, iba sentada al lado de su madrastra muy quieta y con expresión agradecida, inclinada hacia delante con una ligera sonrisa, como si fuese la primera vez que la sacaban a pasear.

El día del que hablo habían atravesado una de las puertas de la ciudad y, al cabo de media hora, habían dejado el carruaje esperándolas junto al camino mientras paseaban sobre la baja hierba de la Campania, que incluso en los meses de invierno está salpicada de delicadas flores. Era una costumbre casi diaria de Isabel, a la que gustaba caminar a paso ligero, aunque no tanto como cuando había llegado a Europa por primera vez. No era la forma de ejercicio favorita de Pansy, pero aun así le gustaba por la sencilla razón de que le gustaba todo, así que se movía con una zancada más corta junto a la esposa de su padre, la cual más tarde, cuando regresaban a Roma, accedía a sus gustos llevándola a hacer el circuito de la colina de Pincio o de la villa Borghese. Pansy había recogido un ramo de flores en una soleada hondonada lejos de las murallas de Roma, así que, al llegar al palazzo Roccanera, fue directamente a su habitación para ponerlas en agua. Isabel entró en el salón que ella solía ocupar, el segundo después de la gran antecámara a la que se accedía desde la escalera, y al que ni siquiera los lujosos arreglos de Gilbert Osmond habían logrado atenuar su aspecto de grandiosa desnudez. Nada más atravesar el umbral de la sala, Isabel se detuvo de repente; la razón de que lo hiciera era que se acababa de llevar una fuerte impresión. En sentido estricto, tal impresión no tenía nada de insólito, pero ella percibió algo nuevo en ella, y el silencio de sus pasos le dio tiempo para observar la escena antes de interrumpirla. Allí estaba madame Merle, con el sombrero puesto, y Gilbert Osmond le estaba hablando. Tardaron como un minuto en darse cuenta de que ella había entrado. Isabel los había visto así a menudo, en efecto, pero lo que no había visto, o al menos no había observado, era que su coloquio se convirtiera de pronto en una especie de silencio lleno de familiaridad, del que, como Isabel advirtió al instante, su repentina aparición iba a sacarles con un sobresalto. Madame Merle estaba de pie sobre la alfombra a escasa distancia del fuego, mientras que Osmond estaba mirándola reclinado en un hondo sillón. Ella tenía la cabeza muy erguida, como era habitual, pero bajaba los ojos para fijarlos en los de él. Lo que primero sorprendió a Isabel fue que Osmond estuviera sentado mientras madame Merle permanecía de pie: había una anomalía en esa actitud que le llamó la atención. Entonces se dio cuenta de que habían llegado a una pausa indolente en su intercambio de ideas y de que estaban meditando, cara a cara, con la libertad de unos viejos amigos que a veces intercambiaban ideas sin llegar a decirlas. No había nada sorprendente en eso, ya que de hecho eran viejos amigos, pero aquello produjo en ella una imagen que solo duró un instante, como un repentino destello de luz. La postura de ambos, sus mutuas y absortas miradas, le resultaron a Isabel un tanto clandestinas. Pero entonces todo acabó cuando apenas empezaba a vislumbrar su significado. Madame Merle la vio y la saludó sin moverse, mientras que su marido se levantó rápidamente de un salto y, al poco, murmuró que tenía que salir a pasear, pidió a su acompañante que lo disculpara y se marchó del salón.

—He venido a verte pensando que ya estarías en casa y, como aún no habías vuelto, me he quedado a esperarte —dijo madame Merle.

—¿No te ha pedido que te sentaras? —le preguntó Isabel con una sonrisa.

Madame Merle miró a su alrededor.

—Ah, claro… Es que ya me iba.

—Supongo que ahora te quedarás.

—Sí, por supuesto. He venido por una razón especial. Estoy dándole vueltas a algo en la cabeza.

—Ya te lo he dicho otras veces: parece que siempre haga falta alguna razón especial para que vengas a esta casa —dijo Isabel.

—Y ya sabes cuál es mi respuesta; que venga o no venga, la razón es siempre la misma: el afecto que te tengo.

—Sí, ya me has dicho eso antes.

—Pues parece como si no te lo creyeras —comentó madame Merle.

—Por Dios, de lo último que dudaría en esta vida es de la profundidad de tus razones —contestó Isabel.

—Pero sí que dudas de la sinceridad de mis palabras.

Isabel negó con la cabeza con expresión grave.

—Sé que siempre has sido muy buena conmigo.

—Siempre que me has dejado serlo. Hay ocasiones en que no lo aceptas, y entonces hay que dejarte estar. Sin embargo, hoy no he venido a ser buena contigo, sino a otra cosa. He venido a librarme de un problema mío… para pasártelo a ti. De eso es de lo que estaba hablando con tu marido.

—Me sorprende, ya que a él no le gustan los problemas.

—Sobre todo los de los demás, lo sé muy bien. Pero me imagino que a ti tampoco te gustan. De todos modos, te gusten o no, tienes que ayudarme. Se trata del pobre señor Rosier.

—Ah —exclamó Isabel pensativa—, entonces es un problema de él, no tuyo.

—Pero ha conseguido endilgármelo a mí. Viene a verme diez veces a la semana para hablarme de Pansy.

—Sí, quiere casarse con ella. Ya lo sé todo.

Madame Merle vaciló un momento.

—Por lo que me ha dicho tu marido pensaba que no lo sabrías.

—¿Y cómo va a saber él lo que sé o dejo de saber? Nunca hemos hablado del tema.

—Supongo que será porque no sabe cómo hablar de él.

—Aun así, es el tipo de asunto sobre el que siempre tiene algo que decir.

—Sí, porque por lo general sabe muy bien lo que pensar. Pero hoy no es el caso.

—¿Y no se lo has dicho tú? —preguntó Isabel.

Madame Merle le dedicó una brillante sonrisa de circunstancias.

—¿Sabes que estás un poco cortante?

—Sí, no lo puedo evitar. El señor Rosier también ha estado hablando conmigo.

—Eso tiene su lógica, ya que estás muy unida a la muchacha.

—Pues no se puede decir que le haya sido de mucha ayuda —dijo Isabel—. Si tú me ves cortante, a saber cómo me verá él.

—Creo que piensa que puedes hacer más de lo que has hecho hasta ahora.

—Yo no puedo hacer nada.

—Por lo menos puedes hacer más que yo. No sé qué misteriosa conexión habrá descubierto el señor Rosier entre Pansy y yo, pero desde el principio acudió a mí como si su suerte estuviese en mi mano. No deja de visitarme para instarme a que haga algo, para saber qué esperanzas tiene, para hablarme de sus sentimientos.

—Está muy enamorado —dijo Isabel.

—Mucho… para tratarse de él.

—Y para tratarse de Pansy, se podría añadir.

Madame Merle bajó la mirada un momento.

—¿No crees que sea atractiva?

—Es la persona más encantadora que pueda existir, pero muy limitada.

—Razón de más para que el señor Rosier la ame. Tampoco él es precisamente ilimitado.

—No —corroboró Isabel—, tiene más o menos la extensión de uno de esos pañuelos de bolsillo, de los pequeños con los bordes de encaje. —De un tiempo a esa parte el humor de Isabel se había vuelto bastante sarcástico, pero enseguida se avergonzó de utilizarlo contra alguien tan inocente como el pretendiente de Pansy—. Es muy amable y honrado —añadió—, y no es tan tonto como parece.

—Afirma que Pansy está encantada con él —dijo madame Merle.

—No lo sé; no se lo he preguntado.

—¿Ni siquiera la has tanteado un poco?

—Eso no me corresponde hacerlo a mí, sino a su padre.

—¡Ah, tú siempre tan estricta! —exclamó madame Merle.

—Debo seguir mi propio criterio.

Madame Merle volvió a dedicarle la misma sonrisa circunspecta.

—No resulta fácil ayudarte.

—¿Ayudarme? —repitió Isabel muy seria—. ¿Qué quieres decir?

—Que es muy fácil disgustarte. ¿Te das cuenta de lo bien que hago al andarme con cuidado? De todas formas te comunico, como le he comunicado a Osmond, que me lavo las manos en el asunto del romance de la señorita Pansy y

el señor Edward Rosier. *Je n'y peux rien, moi!* No puedo hablarle a Pansy de él. Sobre todo —añadió madame Merle—, porque no lo considero un ejemplo ideal de marido.

Isabel reflexionó un momento, y después dijo con una sonrisa:

—Entonces no te lavas las manos. No puedes… —dijo a continuación en un tono bien distinto—, estás demasiado interesada.

Madame Merle se levantó lentamente. Había dirigido a Isabel una mirada tan rápida como el presentimiento que había destellado ante nuestra heroína poco antes. Salvo que, en esta ocasión, Isabel no la había captado.

—Pregúntale la próxima vez que lo veas y lo comprobarás —dijo madame Merle.

—No puedo preguntárselo, porque ha dejado de venir a esta casa. Gilbert le ha hecho saber que no es bienvenido.

—Sí, es verdad —asintió la otra—, se me había olvidado, y eso que es la mayor de sus lamentaciones. Dice que Osmond le ha insultado. De todos modos —prosiguió—, no le desagrada a Osmond tanto como cree.

Se había erguido como si fuera a poner punto final a la conversación, pero permaneció allí mirando a su alrededor, lo cual parecía indicar que tenía algo más que decir. Isabel se dio cuenta, y hasta se imaginó de lo que quería hablarle, pero ella también tenía sus propias razones para no darle pie a hacerlo.

—Eso debió de alegrarle, si se lo dijiste —replicó Isabel sonriendo.

—Claro que se lo dije. En ese sentido sí que le he dado ánimos. Le he recomendado que sea paciente, y le he dicho que su caso no es tan desesperado si sabe controlar su lengua y permanece callado. Lamentablemente, se ha empeñado en sentir celos.

—¿Celos?

—De lord Warburton, del que dice que siempre está aquí.

Isabel, que estaba cansada, había permanecido sentada; pero al oír eso también se levantó.

—¡Ah! —fue lo único que dijo mientras se dirigía lentamente a la chimenea.

Madame Merle la observó al pasar, y también cuando se detuvo un momento ante el espejo para arreglarse un mechón de pelo suelto.

—El pobre señor Rosier no deja de decir que no cree imposible que lord Warburton se enamore de Pansy —continuó madame Merle.

Isabel permaneció en silencio un instante; luego se apartó del espejo.

—Es cierto, no hay nada imposible —contestó al fin, en tono más serio y suave.

—Eso tuve que admitirle al señor Rosier. Y lo mismo piensa tu marido.

—No sé nada de eso.

—Pregúntale y verás.

—No se lo pienso preguntar —afirmó Isabel.

—Perdóname, olvidaba que ya me lo habías dejado claro antes. Naturalmente —añadió madame Merle—, tú habrás tenido muchísimas más ocasiones que yo de observar el comportamiento de lord Warburton.

—No veo por qué no habría de decirte que siente gran aprecio por mi hijastra.

Madame Merle volvió a lanzarle una de sus rápidas miradas.

—Que la aprecia… ¿Quieres decir de la misma forma que el señor Rosier?

—No sé cuál es la forma del señor Rosier, pero lord Warburton me ha informado de que está encantado con Pansy.

—¿Y no se lo has dicho a Osmond?

Fue un comentario inmediato, precipitado, que casi estalló de los labios de madame Merle. Isabel la miró.

—Supongo que lo sabrá en su momento. Lord Warburton tiene lengua y sabe expresarse solo.

Madame Merle se dio cuenta al instante de que había hablado con más premura de la habitual en ella, y dicha reflexión hizo que se le sonrojaran las mejillas. Dio a ese traicionero impulso tiempo para que se aplacara, y a continuación dijo, como si hubiera estado reflexionando sobre el asunto:

—Eso sería mejor que casarse con el pobre señor Rosier.

—Mucho mejor, en mi opinión.

—Sería maravilloso; sería una gran boda. Es todo un detalle por parte de lord Warburton.

—¿Todo un detalle?

—El que se haya fijado en una joven tan sencilla.

—Yo no lo veo así.

—Eres muy amable al decir eso, pero, al fin y al cabo, Pansy Osmond…

—¡Al fin y al cabo, Pansy Osmond es la persona más atractiva que él haya conocido jamás! —exclamó Isabel.

Madame Merle la miró fijamente, y sin duda tenía motivos para estar desconcertada.

—Vaya, hace un momento parecía más bien que la estuvieras menospreciando.

—He dicho que es limitada y lo es, como también lo es lord Warburton.

—Y como lo somos todos, ya puestos. Si no es más de lo que Pansy merece, mejor que mejor. Pero si ella entrega su afecto al señor Rosier, no admitiré que sea lo que merece. Sería demasiado perverso.

—¡El señor Rosier es un incordio! —exclamó Isabel bruscamente.

—Estoy totalmente de acuerdo contigo, y me encanta saber que no he de darle ánimos. De aquí en adelante, cuando vaya a verme, mi puerta estará cerrada para él.

Y, tras arreglarse el manto, madame Merle se dispuso a marcharse. No obstante, mientras se dirigía a la puerta, la detuvo una incongruente petición de Isabel:

—De todas formas, sé amable con él.

Levantó los hombros y las cejas y miró a su amiga.

—No entiendo tus contradicciones. Por supuesto que no pienso ser amable con él, porque sería una falsa amabilidad. Quiero ver a Pansy casada con lord Warburton.

—Primero tendrás que esperar a que él se lo pida.

—Si lo que dices es cierto, se lo pedirá. Sobre todo —añadió enseguida—, si tú lo convences.

—¿Que yo lo convenza?

—Está en tu mano. Tienes mucha influencia sobre él.

Isabel frunció el ceño ligeramente.

—¿De dónde has sacado eso?

—Me lo dijo la señora Touchett. Tú no, desde luego… ¡nunca! —contestó madame Merle con una sonrisa.

—Por supuesto que nunca te he contado nada de eso.

—Podrías haberlo hecho en su momento, cuando tuvimos tantas oportunidades y nos contábamos nuestras confidencias. Pero la verdad es que me dijiste muy poco. Desde entonces así lo he pensado a menudo.

Isabel también lo había hecho, y a veces con cierta satisfacción, pero en esos momentos no quería admitirlo, quizá porque podría parecer que se regodeaba en su silencio.

—Parece que mi tía te tenía muy bien informada —fue lo único que dijo.

—Me contó que habías rechazado una proposición de matrimonio de lord Warburton, porque estaba muy enojada y no podía dejar de pensar en el tema. Por supuesto, creo que hiciste lo mejor que podrías haber hecho. Pero, ya que no te casaste con él, compénsalo ayudándole a casarse con otra persona.

Isabel escuchó esas palabras con un rostro que se obstinaba en no reflejar la brillante expresividad del de madame Merle. Pero, al cabo de un momento, dijo de forma bastante sensata y amable:

—La verdad es que me alegraría mucho por Pansy si el tema pudiera arreglarse satisfactoriamente.

Dicho lo cual, su acompañante, que pareció tomarse esas palabras como un buen presagio, la abrazó con más cariño del que cabría esperar y se retiró con aire triunfal.

41

Esa noche Osmond sacó el tema por primera vez, tras entrar ya muy tarde en el salón donde Isabel se encontraba a solas. Habían pasado la velada en casa, y Pansy ya se había retirado a dormir. Después de cenar, él se había encerrado en una pequeña estancia en la que había dispuesto todos sus libros y a la que llamaba su estudio. A las diez se había presentado lord Warburton, como hacía siempre que sabía por Isabel que la encontraría en casa; iba de camino a algún otro sitio y solo se quedó media hora. Tras preguntarle por Ralph, Isabel le dirigió muy poco la palabra con toda intención, ya que quería que entablara conversación con su hijastra. Con tal fin, hizo como si leyese, y al cabo de un rato se sentó al piano mientras se preguntaba si no debería irse de la habitación. Poco a poco iba apreciando cada vez más la idea de que Pansy se convirtiera en la esposa del señor de la hermosa Lockleigh, aunque al principio no le hubiera producido gran entusiasmo. Esa tarde, madame Merle había prendido fuego a una gran acumulación de material inflamable. Cuando Isabel estaba triste siempre miraba a su alrededor, en parte por instinto y en parte por teoría, en busca de algún impulso positivo. Nunca conseguía librarse de la sensación de que la tristeza era una forma de enfermedad, una forma de padecer en vez de hacer. Por lo tanto, hacer, fuera lo que fuese, sería una buena vía de escape, y quizá hasta cierto punto un remedio. Además, quería convencerse de que había hecho todo lo posible para complacer a su marido, decidida como estaba a que no la atormentase la idea de que él llegara a quejarse de la falta de iniciativa de su esposa. A Osmond le gustaría mucho ver a Pansy casada con un noble inglés, y bien que hacía, ya que dicho noble era una persona de lo más cabal. Isabel tenía la impresión de que, si conseguía que se produjera tal acontecimiento, habría cumplido con su papel de buena esposa. Eso era lo que quería ser; quería poder creer sinceramente, con pruebas que lo demostrasen, que lo había sido. Además, tal empresa tenía otras ventajas. La mantendría ocupada, que era lo que más deseaba en esos momentos. Incluso la entretendría y, si podía entretenerse de verdad, significaría que aún cabía la posibilidad de salvarse. Por último, sería un favor que le haría a lord Warburton, el cual estaba claro que admiraba mucho a la encantadora joven. Resultaba un poco extraño que así fuera, siendo él quien era, pero al fin y al cabo tampoco había forma de explicar tales impresiones. Pansy podía cautivar a cualquiera, o al menos a cualquiera… que no fuese lord Warburton. Isabel la consideraba demasiado insignificante, demasiado leve, incluso quizá demasiado artificial para que eso pudiese ocurrir. Siempre tenía algo de ese aire de muñequita, y eso no era lo que él buscaba. Sin embargo, ¿quién podía saber lo que buscaban los hombres? Buscaban lo que encontraban, y solo sabían lo que les gustaba cuando lo veían. No había teoría válida para tales cuestiones, y no había nada que fuese más incomprensible o más normal que todo lo demás. Si lord Warburton se había interesado por ella, podría parecer extraño que ahora se interesase por Pansy, que era tan distinta; pero tampoco se había interesado tanto por Isabel como él mismo había creído. Y, si lo había hecho, ya lo había superado por completo, por lo que era normal que, una vez fracasado ese intento, pensase que otro con alguien bien distinto sí que podría prosperar. Como digo, en un principio Isabel no había sentido gran entusiasmo con respecto a esa cuestión, pero ese día sí que lo sentía y lograba hacerla casi feliz. Era sorprendente la felicidad que aún le producía la idea de complacer a su marido. ¡Qué pena, sin embargo, que Edward Rosier se hubiese cruzado en su camino!

Al pensar eso, la luz que de repente había iluminado dicho camino perdió algo de intensidad. Por desgracia, Isabel estaba muy segura de que Pansy consideraba al señor Rosier el joven más agradable de todos; tan segura como si hubiese hablado con ella del tema. Y era muy enojoso estar tan segura, después de haberse abstenido con tanto cuidado de decírselo a sí misma; casi tan enojoso como el hecho de que el pobre señor Rosier también estuviese convencido de ello. Sin duda este era muy inferior a lord Warburton. No se trataba tanto de la diferencia de fortuna que había entre ambos como de las diferencias entre ellos dos en sí, en las que el joven norteamericano tenía todas las de perder. Respondía mucho más al tipo de caballero distinguido e inútil que el noble inglés. Cierto era que tampoco había ninguna razón por la que Pansy tuviese que casarse con un estadista, pero, si un estadista la admiraba, eso era asunto de él, y Pansy sería toda una perla como esposa de un aristócrata.

Tal vez parezca al lector que la señora Osmond se había vuelto, de pronto y de forma extraña, bastante cínica, pues terminó diciéndose que probablemente se podría solventar esa dificultad. Un impedimento encarnado por el pobre Rosier nunca resultaría muy peligroso, y siempre había formas de allanar los obstáculos secundarios. Isabel era muy

consciente de que no conocía el alcance exacto de la tenacidad de Pansy, que podría ser muy grande y un gran inconveniente, pero se inclinaba a verla más como alguien que dejaría estar las cosas si recibía las sugerencias adecuadas, que como alguien que se aferraría a sus deseos al ser estos reprobados, ya que sin duda tenía mucho más desarrollada la capacidad de consentir que la de protestar. Pansy se aferraría a algo, sí, por supuesto, pero en realidad le daría igual a lo que fuese. Lord Warburton le serviría igual que el señor Rosier, sobre todo porque parecía que aquel le gustaba bastante. Se lo había dicho a Isabel sin reservas, comentándole que la conversación de lord Warburton, que le había contado todo acerca de la India, le parecía muy interesante. La actitud de él con Pansy era de lo más correcta y natural; Isabel se había dado cuenta de eso por sí misma, como también había observado que no le hablaba en absoluto en tono condescendiente a la vista de su juventud y sencillez, sino, por el contrario, como si ella entendiera de lo que le hablaba con la misma facilidad con que seguía los argumentos de las óperas de moda, llegando incluso a prestar atención a la música y al barítono. Él solo procuraba ser atento… tanto como lo había sido tiempo atrás en Gardencourt con otra jovencita atolondrada. Eso siempre gustaba a una muchacha; Isabel recordaba cómo le había pasado a ella misma, y se dijo que, de haber sido tan simple como Pansy, le habría producido aún mayor impresión. No había sido simple cuando lo había rechazado; dicha operación había sido tan complicada como, más adelante, la de aceptar a Osmond. Sin embargo, Pansy, a pesar de su simplicidad, entendía lo que pasaba, y estaba encantada de que lord Warburton no le hablara de parejas de baile y de ramos de flores, sino del estado de Italia, de la situación de los campesinos, del famoso impuesto de molienda, de la *pellagra*, o de sus impresiones de la sociedad romana. Mientras pasaba la aguja por el bastidor, ella lo miraba con ojos dulces y sumisos, y cuando los bajaba lanzaba rápidas miradas de reojo a su persona, a sus manos, a sus pies, a su ropa, como si lo estuviese sopesando. Isabel podría haberle recordado que hasta en su aspecto físico lord Warburton era superior al señor Rosier, pero en tales momentos se contentaba con preguntarse dónde estaría ese caballero, puesto que ya no acudía nunca al palazzo Roccanera. Como digo, resultaba sorprendente lo mucho que había calado en ella la idea de ayudar a su marido para complacerlo.

Resultaba sorprendente por una serie de razones que comentaré más adelante. La noche de la que estoy hablando, mientras lord Warburton estaba allí, Isabel había estado a punto de dar el gran paso de salir de la habitación y dejarlos a los dos solos. Digo el gran paso porque así es como lo habría considerado Gilbert Osmond, e Isabel estaba intentando adoptar en lo posible el punto de vista de su marido. Y lo consiguió en cierto modo, pero sin llegar a consumar el objetivo que he mencionado. Al fin y al cabo, no salía de ella hacerlo, ya que había algo que se lo impedía. No se trataba exactamente de que fuese una actitud rastrera o insidiosa, puesto que las mujeres por lo general practicaban dichas maniobras con la conciencia muy tranquila, y de forma instintiva Isabel creía en los dictados de su género más que renegaba de ellos. Pero había una vaga duda que se interponía, una sensación de no estar del todo segura. Así pues, se quedó en la sala, y al cabo de un rato lord Warburton se marchó a su fiesta, de la que prometió hacer un relato completo a Pansy a la mañana siguiente. Después de su partida, Isabel se preguntó si con su presencia habría evitado que ocurriese algo que habría podido pasar de ausentarse ella durante un cuarto de hora, y terminó por concluir, siempre mentalmente, que cuando su distinguido visitante quisiera que ella se marchara, no le costaría encontrar la forma de hacérselo saber. Pansy no comentó nada sobre él después de que se fuera, e Isabel hizo lo mismo a propósito, ya que había decidido hacer voto de silencio hasta que lord Warburton se declarase. Estaba tardando más de lo que podría deducirse de la descripción de sus sentimientos que había hecho a Isabel. Pansy se fue a la cama, e Isabel tuvo que admitir que no tenía la menor idea de lo que estaría pensando su hijastra. De pronto, su pequeña y transparente compañera se había vuelto opaca.

Se quedó sola contemplando el fuego hasta que, al cabo de media hora, entró su marido. Este estuvo un rato deambulando en silencio hasta que se sentó y se quedó mirando el fuego al igual que Isabel. Pero ella había apartado la vista de las titilantes llamas de la chimenea para fijarla en el rostro de Osmond, que contempló mientras él permanecía callado. La observación disimulada se había convertido para ella en una costumbre; un instinto, que no sería exagerado decir que iba unido al de autodefensa, lo había convertido en hábito. Quería conocer en la medida de lo posible los pensamientos de Osmond, saber de antemano lo que iba a decir, para poder tener preparada la respuesta. Últimamente preparar respuestas no era su punto fuerte; a ese respecto, a lo más a lo que solía llegar era a pensar después en las cosas inteligentes que podría haber dicho. Pero había aprendido a ser cauta, y lo había aprendido en cierta medida a partir de la propia expresión de su marido. Seguía siendo el mismo rostro al que había mirado, quizá con ojos igual de interesados pero menos penetrantes, en la terraza de una villa florentina, con la única excepción de que Osmond se había vuelto un poco más grueso desde que se habían casado. Aun así, todavía resultaba

un caballero muy distinguido.

—¿Ha venido lord Warburton? —le preguntó él al poco.

—Sí, ha estado una media hora.

—¿Ha visto a Pansy?

—Sí, ha estado sentado con Pansy en el sofá.

—¿Ha hablado mucho con ella?

—Prácticamente solo ha hablado con ella.

—Parece un hombre muy atento. ¿No es así como tú llamas a eso?

—Yo no lo llamo de ninguna forma —contestó Isabel—. Estaba esperando a que tú le pusieras nombre.

—Es una deferencia que no muestras muy a menudo —dijo Osmond al cabo de un momento.

—Esta vez he decidido intentar actuar como tú querrías. He fracasado muchas veces en eso.

Osmond giró la cabeza lentamente y la miró.

—¿Intentas discutir conmigo?

—No, intento vivir en paz.

—Pues no puede haber cosa más fácil. Ya sabes que yo nunca discuto.

—Entonces, ¿cómo llamas a intentar enfadarme? —preguntó Isabel.

—No lo intento, y si ocurre es lo más normal del mundo. Además, ahora no lo estoy intentando en absoluto.

Isabel sonrió.

—De todas formas da igual. También he decidido no volver a enfadarme nunca.

—Excelente decisión. No sueles estar de buen humor.

—No, no suelo —dijo Isabel al tiempo que apartaba el libro que había estado leyendo y cogía la tira de bordado que Pansy había dejado sobre la mesa.

—En parte es por eso por lo que no te he hablado de este asunto de mi hija —dijo Osmond, llamando a Pansy de una manera que no era frecuente en él—. Tenía miedo de que te opusieras, de que tuvieras tu propio punto de vista sobre el tema. De momento ya me he deshecho de Rosier.

—¿Te daba miedo que me pusiera de parte del señor Rosier? ¿No has notado que nunca te he hablado de él?

—Tampoco te he dado nunca ocasión de hacerlo. Hablamos muy poco últimamente. Pero sé que es un viejo amigo tuyo.

—Sí, es un viejo amigo mío. —A Isabel le importaba tan poco el señor Rosier como el bordado que tenía en la mano, pero era cierto que era un antiguo amigo, y que ante su marido no quería desprenderse de tales lazos. Este tenía una forma de manifestar su desprecio por esas amistades que hacía que se fortaleciera la lealtad de Isabel hacia ellas, incluso cuando, como en ese caso, eran de por sí insignificantes. A veces sentía una especie de intensa ternura hacia determinados recuerdos que solo tenían el mérito de pertenecer a su vida de soltera—. Pero, en lo que a Pansy respecta, no le he dado ningún ánimo al señor Rosier —añadió al cabo de un momento.

—Una decisión muy afortunada —comentó Osmond.

—Supongo que quieres decir afortunada para mí. A él le importa bien poco.

—No vale la pena que hablemos del señor Rosier —dijo Osmond—. Ya te he dicho que me he librado de él.

—Sí, pero un enamorado despechado no deja de ser un enamorado, y a veces incluso más. El señor Rosier sigue albergando esperanzas.

—¡Pues que las disfrute con salud! Mi hija solo tiene que esperar sentada tranquilamente a convertirse en lady Warburton.

—¿Es eso lo que te gustaría? —preguntó Isabel con una sencillez que no era tan fingida como podría parecer.

Estaba decidida a no hacer suposiciones, pues Osmond conocía la forma de volverlas sin previo aviso en contra de ella. El grado de intensidad con que él quería que su hija se convirtiera en lady Warburton había formado la esencia misma de las reflexiones más recientes de Isabel, pero eso había sido solo para sus adentros, y no pensaba reconocer nada hasta que Osmond lo dijese de su propia boca. No iba a dar por sentado, tratándose de él, que su marido pensaba que lord Warburton era un botín por el que valía la pena esforzarse hasta un grado que no era normal entre los Osmond. Gilbert estaba diciendo constantemente que, para él, nada en la vida podía considerarse un botín o recompensa; que se codeaba de igual a igual con las personas más distinguidas del mundo, y que su hija solo tenía que mirar a su alrededor y escoger al príncipe que quisiera. Por lo tanto, suponía un lapso en su actitud coherente decir explícitamente que anhelaba conseguir a lord Warburton, y que si se les escapaba dicho noble sería difícil

encontrar a otro equivalente; lo cual agravaba el problema, ya que otra de sus afirmaciones habituales era aseverar que nunca era incoherente. A él le habría gustado que su esposa pasara de puntillas sobre ese punto, pero, por extraño que resulte, ahora que Isabel se encontraba cara a cara con él, y aunque una hora antes prácticamente había trazado todo un plan para satisfacerlo, no se sentía complaciente y no estaba dispuesta a pasar de puntillas sobre el tema. Sabía perfectamente el efecto que tendría su pregunta en él, que sería como una humillación; pero le daba igual, ya que él era muy capaz de humillarla a ella, del mismo modo que también era capaz de esperar a que llegasen las grandes oportunidades y a mostrar en ocasiones una indiferencia casi inexplicable hacia las pequeñas. Quizá Isabel aprovechó esa pequeña oportunidad porque no se le había presentado una mejor.

De momento, Osmond logró salir con bastante dignidad del brete:

—Me gustaría enormemente. Sería un gran matrimonio. Y además lord Warburton cuenta también con la ventaja de ser un viejo amigo tuyo, y supongo que le agradaría mucho ingresar en nuestra familia. Resulta muy curioso que todos los admiradores de Pansy sean viejos amigos tuyos.

—Es normal que vengan a verme, y que entonces conozcan a Pansy. Y al verla es normal que se enamoren de ella.

—Eso creo yo. Pero no pareces muy convencida.

—Me alegraría mucho que Pansy se casase con lord Warburton —prosiguió Isabel con sinceridad—. Es un hombre excelente. No obstante, dices que solo tiene que esperar sentada y tranquila, pero puede que no lo haga. Si pierde al señor Rosier, puede que salte del asiento.

Osmond no pareció prestar ninguna atención a eso mientras seguía contemplando el fuego.

—A Pansy le gustaría ser una gran dama —comentó al momento con un tono de cierta ternura—. Por encima de todo quiere complacer —añadió.

—Complacer al señor Rosier, tal vez.

—No, complacerme a mí.

—Creo que a mí también un poco —dijo Isabel.

—Sí, tiene una gran opinión de ti, pero hará lo que yo quiera.

—Si estás seguro de eso, me parece muy bien.

—Mientras tanto —dijo Osmond—, me gustaría que nuestro distinguido visitante se decidiese a hablar.

—Ya ha hablado… conmigo. Me dijo que sería un gran honor para él pensar que Pansy podría interesarse por su persona.

Osmond giró la cabeza rápidamente hacia ella, pero en un principio no dijo nada.

—¿Por qué no me lo habías contado? —preguntó al fin con dureza.

—Porque no había tenido ocasión. Ya sabes cómo vivimos. Lo he hecho en cuanto se me ha presentado la oportunidad.

—¿Le hablaste de Rosier?

—Sí, un poco.

—No creo que eso hiciera falta.

—Pensé que lo mejor sería que lo supiera, para que… para que…

E Isabel se detuvo.

—¿Para qué?

—Para que actuase en consecuencia.

—¿Para que se echara atrás, quieres decir?

—No, para impulsarle a avanzar mientras aún estaba a tiempo.

—Pues no es ese el efecto que parece haber tenido.

—Debes tener paciencia —dijo Isabel—. Ya sabes lo tímidos que son los ingleses.

—Pero este no lo es. Desde luego no lo fue cuando te hizo la corte a ti.

Isabel había temido que Osmond sacara ese tema, que le resultaba muy desagradable.

—Perdona que te diga que conmigo lo fue, y mucho —replicó.

Osmond no contestó nada durante un rato; cogió un libro y lo hojeó mientras Isabel permanecía en silencio observando el bordado de Pansy.

—Debes de tener mucha influencia sobre él —continuó Osmond al fin—. En cuanto te lo propongas de verdad, seguro que puedes hacer que se declare.

Eso era aún más ofensivo, pero Isabel comprendió que era muy normal que él lo dijese; al fin y al cabo, era

prácticamente lo mismo que se había dicho ella.

—¿Y por qué habría de tener yo ninguna influencia sobre él? —preguntó—. ¿Qué he hecho yo para que me deba nada?

—Te negaste a casarte con él —contestó Osmond sin apartar la mirada del libro.

—No es algo de lo que me vanaglorie —replicó ella.

Al momento Osmond dejó el libro, se levantó y se plantó ante la chimenea con las manos a la espalda.

—Bien, por mi parte dejo el asunto completamente en tus manos. Con un poco de buena voluntad no te costará arreglar la situación. Piénsalo, y recuerda lo mucho que confío en ti.

Esperó un poco para darle tiempo a contestar; pero Isabel no dijo nada, y al rato Osmond salió tranquilamente de la habitación.

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Isabel no había contestado nada porque las palabras de Osmond la habían enfrentado de lleno a la situación y estaba absorta en su contemplación. Había algo en ellas que de pronto le había producido un fuerte estremecimiento, hasta el punto de no confiar en que pudiese hablar. Después de que él se hubo ido, se reclinó en el sillón y cerró los ojos; y durante largo tiempo, que se prolongó hasta altas horas de la noche, permaneció sentada en aquella silenciosa sala entregada a la meditación. Cuando entró un sirviente a avivar el fuego, Isabel le pidió que trajese velas nuevas y se fuera a dormir. Osmond le había pedido que pensase en lo que le había dicho, y en efecto eso hizo, además de pensar también en otras muchas cosas. Su insinuación de que aún tenía una clara influencia sobre lord Warburton le había provocado el sobresalto que suele acompañar a las revelaciones inesperadas. ¿Sería cierto que todavía había algo entre ellos que podría servir para obligarlo a declararse a Pansy… la necesidad por parte de él de contar con su aprobación, el deseo de hacer lo que a ella más complaciera? Hasta ese momento Isabel nunca se había hecho esa pregunta, ya que no se había visto obligada a hacerlo; pero ahora que se la habían planteado directamente, tuvo que enfrentarse a la respuesta, y esta la asustó. Sí, había algo entre ellos… por parte de lord Warburton. Cuando este había llegado a Roma, Isabel creía que el vínculo que los unía estaba roto por completo, pero poco a poco se había visto obligada a aceptar que todavía existía de forma palpable. Era tan fino como un cabello, pero había momentos en que a Isabel le parecía oírlo vibrar. Por su parte no había cambiado nada, y seguía pensando de él lo mismo de siempre. No hacía ninguna falta que cambiaran sus sentimientos, que de hecho le parecían mejores que nunca. Pero ¿y él? ¿Seguía teniendo la idea de que ella podría significar más para él que las demás mujeres? ¿Albergaba el deseo de aprovechar el recuerdo de los pocos momentos de intimidad que habían compartido en el pasado? Isabel sabía que había reconocido algunos indicios de dicha disposición, pero ¿cuáles eran sus esperanzas, sus pretensiones, y de qué extraña forma se entremezclaban con su evidente y sincero aprecio por la pobre Pansy? ¿Estaba enamorado de la esposa de Gilbert Osmond, y, si era así, qué satisfacción esperaba obtener de ello? Si estaba enamorado de Pansy no lo podía estar también de su madrastra, y si estaba enamorado de su madrastra no podía estarlo de Pansy. ¿Debía aprovechar esa ventaja con la que contaba para obligarlo a comprometerse con Pansy, a sabiendas de que él lo haría por ella y no por la pobre criatura? ¿Era ese el favor que le había pedido su marido? Cuando menos, era la cuestión de la que se tenía que ocupar, desde el momento en que había admitido para sus adentros que su viejo amigo seguía sintiendo la misma predilección por su compañía. No era una tarea agradable; de hecho, le resultaba bastante repulsiva. Se preguntó consternada si lord Warburton no estaría fingiendo amar a Pansy para poder cultivar otras satisfacciones y lo que se podrían llamar otras oportunidades. Al momento Isabel lo declaró inocente de tan sofisticada duplicidad, pues prefería considerar que actuaba de buena fe. Pero, si su admiración por Pansy era una falsa ilusión, eso a duras penas lo hacía mejor que si fuera una falacia. Isabel vagó entre esas ingratas posibilidades hasta que se perdió por completo; algunas de ellas, conforme le iban saliendo de repente al paso, le parecían en verdad desagradables. Entonces consiguió salir de aquel laberinto frotándose los ojos, y se dijo que su imaginación le estaba haciendo un flaco favor, y más flaco favor le hacía aún la imaginación de su marido a sí mismo. Lord Warburton actuaba de forma tan desinteresada como siempre, y ella solo era para él lo que era. Prefería quedarse con esa idea hasta que se demostrase lo contrario; demostrado de forma más consumada que mediante un mero comentario cínico de Osmond.

No obstante, dicha resolución no le proporcionó esa noche mucha tranquilidad, ya que su alma estaba acechada por terrores que se adueñaban de su pensamiento en cuanto encontraban espacio para asentarse. Apenas sabía qué era lo que les había instado a aflorar con mayor brío, a menos que fuera la extraña impresión que había tenido esa tarde de que su marido mantenía un contacto más íntimo con madame Merle de lo que ella hubiese sospechado. Esa impresión acudía a su mente una y otra vez, y se sorprendió de no haberla tenido antes. Además de eso, la breve conversación que había tenido con Osmond media hora antes era un evidente ejemplo de la habilidad que él tenía para marchitar todo lo que tocaba, para echar a perder para ella todo aquello que miraba. Estaba muy bien eso de empeñarse en darle una prueba de lealtad, pero lo cierto era que el mero hecho de saber que él esperaba algo provocaba en ella una reacción en contra. Era como si Osmond llevara consigo el mal de ojo, como si su presencia

fuera la peste y su favor una desgracia. ¿Era culpa de él, o solo de la profunda desconfianza que ella había desarrollado hacia su persona? Dicha desconfianza era el resultado más evidente de su corta vida de casados; se había abierto un abismo entre ellos por encima del cual se miraban con ojos que eran una declaración por ambas partes de la decepción que se habían llevado. Era un enfrentamiento extraño, del tipo que Isabel jamás se habría imaginado, en el que el principio vital para uno se convertía en algo despreciable para el otro. No era culpa de ella, porque no había buscado decepcionarle; tan solo lo había admirado y creído en él. Había dado los primeros pasos con la mayor confianza, pero de pronto había descubierto que el panorama infinito de la vida que se desplegaba ante ella no era más que un callejón oscuro y angosto con una pared ciega. En lugar de conducir a las cumbres de la felicidad, desde las que el mundo parecería estar a los pies de uno, al que podría mirar desde arriba con una sensación de júbilo y ventaja para juzgar, elegir y compadecer, conducía al abismo, a un mundo de restricciones y depresiones en el que el sonido de otras vidas, más libres y relajadas, se oía como si procediera de arriba, agudizando la sensación de fracaso. Lo que ensombrecía su mundo era la fuerte desconfianza que sentía hacia su marido. Se trataba de un sentimiento que era fácil de señalar pero no tanto de explicar, y de un carácter tan complejo que había necesitado mucho tiempo y aún más sufrimiento hasta alcanzar su actual grado de perfección. Para Isabel sufrir era un estado activo; no era un estremecimiento, un momento de estupor o de desesperación, sino una entrega apasionada al pensamiento, a la especulación, a reaccionar ante cualquier presión. No obstante, se enorgullecía de haber guardado para sí misma el secreto del fracaso de su fe, de que nadie lo sospechara a excepción de Osmond. Sí, él lo sabía, y hasta había veces que a Isabel le parecía que disfrutaba sabiéndolo. Había ocurrido de forma gradual, pues Isabel no había comenzado a alarmarse después del primer año de su vida en común, que en un principio había sido íntima y admirable. Entonces habían empezado a agolparse las sombras, como si Osmond, de forma deliberada y casi maligna, hubiese ido apagando las luces una a una. Al principio la oscuridad era tenue e imprecisa, e Isabel todavía podía moverse por ella. Pero se fue haciendo cada vez más profunda y, aunque de vez en cuando se despejaba, siempre quedaban ciertos rincones del radio de visión de Isabel que eran de un negro impenetrable. Esas sombras no emanaban de su propia mente, de eso estaba segura, porque había hecho todo lo posible para ser justa y afable, para no ver más que la verdad. Eran una parte, una especie de creación y consecuencia, de la sola presencia de su marido. No eran sus fechorías ni sus vilezas; Isabel no lo acusaba de nada… salvo de una cosa, que no era un crimen. No sabía de nada malo que hubiera hecho, no era violento ni cruel: simplemente creía que él la odiaba. Eso era lo único de lo que lo acusaba, y lo más triste de todo era precisamente que no se trataba de ningún crimen, porque de haberlo sido ella podría haber encontrado alguna forma de reparación. Osmond había descubierto que ella era muy distinta a como había supuesto que sería. Al principio había creído que podría cambiarla, e Isabel había intentado ser como él quería. Pero, al fin y al cabo, ella era ella… y eso era algo que no podía evitar. Ya no valía la pena intentar fingir o ponerse alguna máscara o vestimenta, porque Osmond ya la conocía y había tomado su decisión. Ella no le tenía miedo, ni temía que le pudiese hacer daño, puesto que el resentimiento que sentía hacia ella no era de ese tipo. Si podía evitarlo, él nunca le daría ningún pretexto ni cometería ninguna equivocación. Al escrutar el futuro con la mirada seca y fija, Isabel se dio cuenta de que él tenía las de ganar, porque ella sí que le daría muchos pretextos y a menudo cometería equivocaciones. Había veces que casi se compadecía de él porque, si bien no había sido su intención engañarlo, era consciente de lo mucho que debía de haberlo hecho en realidad. Había tratado de pasar desapercibida cuando se habían conocido; se había empequeñecido, fingiendo ser menos de lo que en verdad era. Eso había ocurrido porque estaba bajo la influencia del extraordinario hechizo que él, por su parte, se había esforzado en crear. Osmond no había cambiado, ni durante el año que la había cortejado había fingido más que ella, pero entonces Isabel solo había visto la mitad de su verdadero carácter, de la misma manera que se veía el disco de la luna cuando estaba parcialmente oculto por la sombra de la tierra. Ahora ya veía la luna llena, el hombre completo. Ella había permanecido quieta, por así decirlo, para que él tuviera el campo libre, pero aun así había confundido la parte por el todo.

¡Ah, había caído por completo bajo aquel hechizo! Y no se había desvanecido, sino que seguía ahí, pues Isabel todavía sabía muy bien qué era lo que hacía a Osmond tan encantador cuando decidía serlo. Había querido serlo cuando la había cortejado y, como ella quería que la hechizasen, no era de extrañar que lo hubiese conseguido. Lo había conseguido porque había sido sincero; eso era algo que ni siquiera ahora Isabel podía negarle. La admiraba y le había dicho por qué: porque era la mujer más imaginativa que había conocido jamás. Bien podría haber sido verdad, pues durante esos meses su imaginación había construido un mundo hecho de cosas insustanciales. Había concebido una idea mucho más maravillosa de lo que él era en realidad, alimentada por sus sentidos hechizados y por esa

fantasía suya que había estado tan agitada. No había interpretado bien a Osmond. Se había dejado llevar por una serie de rasgos de este que la habían impresionado, y en los que había creído ver a una persona excepcional. El hecho de que fuese pobre y estuviese solo, y aun así mantuviese ese aire de nobleza, era lo que había despertado su interés y había parecido brindarle la oportunidad que ella buscaba. Había visto a Osmond rodeado por un aura de indefinible belleza… en su situación, en su mente, en su rostro. Al mismo tiempo había percibido su indefensión y pasividad, pero dicha constatación había adoptado la forma de una ternura que era la esencia misma del respeto. Él era como un navegante escéptico que paseara por la playa mientras esperaba a que subiese la marea, mirando hacia el horizonte pero sin decidirse a hacerse a la mar. Todo eso era lo que había dado a Isabel la oportunidad que anhelaba. Ella botaría su barco, ella sería su providencia, ella estaría encantada de amarle. Y lo había amado, se había entregado a él con ansia y pasión, en parte por lo que veía en él, pero también por lo que ella le aportaba y por lo que podría enriquecerlo con su entrega. Al rememorar la pasión de aquellas semanas, se dio cuenta de que había algo de maternal en ella: la felicidad de una mujer que estaba contribuyendo a algo, que llegaba con las manos llenas. Pero ahora veía con claridad que, de no haber tenido dinero, nunca lo habría hecho. Y entonces recordó al pobre señor Touchett, que descansaba bajo tierra inglesa, ¡el benefactor de su infinita aflicción! Porque esa y no otra era la increíble realidad. En el fondo, su dinero había sido una carga para ella, como una losa sobre su mente, desbordándola con el deseo de transferir su peso a otra conciencia, a otro receptáculo mejor preparado. ¿Qué podría aliviarle más la conciencia que entregárselo al hombre de gusto más refinado del mundo? A menos que lo hubiese donado a un hospital, no había nada mejor que pudiese hacer con él, y no había institución de caridad que le interesase más que Gilbert Osmond. Él utilizaría su fortuna de un modo que ayudaría a Isabel a tener mejor concepto de ese dinero, y que eliminaría del mismo cierta vulgaridad inherente a la buena suerte de recibir una herencia inesperada. No existía delicadeza alguna en el hecho de heredar setenta mil libras; toda la delicadeza residía en que el señor Touchett se las hubiera dejado a ella. Pero casarse con Gilbert Osmond y entregarle esa suma… eso sí implicaría cierta delicadeza por parte de ella. También supondría menos por parte de Osmond, pero eso ya era asunto de él, y si la amaba de verdad no le importaría que fuese rica. ¿Acaso no había tenido el valor de decirle a Isabel que se alegraba de que lo fuese?

A Isabel le ardieron las mejillas cuando se preguntó si en realidad no se habría casado sobre la base de una engañosa teoría, tan solo pensando en hacer algo positivo con su dinero. No obstante, se respondió enseguida que eso solo era la mitad de la historia. También había sido porque la había invadido cierto fervor, provocado porque creía que el afecto de él era sincero y porque le encantaban sus cualidades personales. Osmond era mejor que cualquier otro. Esa suprema convicción había llenado la vida de Isabel durante meses, y todavía le quedaba la suficiente para demostrarle que no podría haber actuado de otra manera. El mejor organismo masculino —en el sentido de la sutileza— que había conocido jamás había pasado a ser de su propiedad, y en un principio, el hecho de que solo tuviera que alargar las manos y sentir su contacto constituía para ella un acto de devoción. No se había equivocado con respecto a la belleza de la mente de Osmond, pues ya conocía perfectamente ese órgano suyo. Había vivido con él, casi había vivido en su interior: parecía haberse convertido en su morada. Si se había dejado atrapar era porque Osmond había tenido mano firme para ello; tal vez mereciera la pena hacer una reflexión. Isabel no había encontrado mente más ingeniosa, más flexible, más cultivada, más entrenada para la realización de admirables ejercicios, pero ahora se las tenía que ver precisamente con ese mismo y exquisito instrumento. Le sobrevino una enorme congoja cuando pensó en la magnitud de la decepción que él debía de haber sufrido, tanta que, dadas las circunstancias, incluso la asombraba que no la odiara aún más. Recordaba muy bien la primera muestra que él había dado de ese odio, que había sido como el timbre que anunciaba que se iba a levantar el telón del verdadero drama de sus vidas. Un día él le había dicho que tenía demasiadas ideas, y que debería librarse de ellas. Ya se lo había dicho antes de que se casaran, pero entonces Isabel no había caído en la cuenta, y solo lo había recordado con posterioridad. Esa segunda vez sí que lo había captado enseguida, porque él se lo había dicho en serio. Las palabras de Osmond habían sonado insignificantes al pronunciarlas, pero, a la luz de su cada vez más profunda experiencia, a Isabel le habían parecido portentosas. Osmond se lo había dicho totalmente en serio: le habría gustado que ella no tuviese nada propio, salvo su hermoso aspecto. Isabel sabía que tenía demasiadas ideas, incluso más de las que él se figuraba, muchas más de las que le había expresado cuando él le había pedido la mano. Sí, Isabel había sido hipócrita por la sencilla razón de que Osmond le gustaba mucho. Tenía demasiadas ideas que se reservaba para sí misma, pero, al fin y al cabo, para eso se casaba uno, para compartirlas con la otra persona. No se podían arrancar de raíz, aunque sin duda se podían reprimir teniendo mucho cuidado en no manifestarlas. No obstante, la cuestión no era que a Osmond

no le gustara que ella tuviese opiniones, eso no era lo importante. Isabel no tenía ninguna que no hubiese estado dispuesta a sacrificar en aras de la satisfacción de sentirse amada por haberlo hecho. Pero a lo que se había referido Osmond era a todo el conjunto: al carácter de Isabel, a su forma de sentir, a su propio juicio. Eso era lo que ella se había reservado, lo que él no había conocido hasta que se había encontrado con ello frente a frente y con la puerta cerrada a sus espaldas. Isabel tenía cierta manera de ver la vida que él se tomaba como una ofensa personal. Bien sabía el cielo que ahora, al menos, se trataba de una manera muy humilde y complaciente. Lo extraño era que ella no hubiese sospechado desde el principio que la manera de ver la vida de él fuese tan diferente. Le había parecido tan amplia, tan ilustrada, tan propia de un hombre honrado y de un caballero. ¿No le había asegurado él que carecía de supersticiones y de aburridas limitaciones, de que sus prejuicios habían perdido toda lozanía? ¿No tenía todo el aspecto de ser un hombre que vivía libremente en el mundo, indiferente a cualquier consideración insignificante, tan solo interesado en la verdad y la sabiduría, y convencido de que dos personas inteligentes debían buscarlas juntos y, las encontrasen o no, al menos obtener algo de felicidad durante la búsqueda? Él le había dicho que le encantaba lo convencional, pero en cierto sentido dicha afirmación resultaba muy noble. Era por eso, por su amor a la armonía, al orden, a la decencia y a todo lo más solemne de la vida, por lo que ella había decidido libremente acompañarlo, y la advertencia de él no había parecido contener ningún mal presagio. Pero, conforme habían pasado los meses y ella lo había seguido aún más allá, él la había conducido hasta su propia morada, y fue entonces cuando Isabel se había dado cuenta de dónde estaba en realidad.

Isabel revivió de nuevo el terror lleno de incredulidad que le había producido captar las verdaderas dimensiones de aquel lugar. Desde entonces vivía entre esas cuatro paredes, que la rodearían el resto de su vida. Era la casa de la oscuridad, de la vacuidad, de la asfixia. La hermosa mente de Osmond no le proporcionaba luz ni aire; de hecho, más bien parecía asomarse por una pequeña ventana desde las alturas y burlarse de ella. Por supuesto, no se trataba de un sufrimiento físico, pues para eso podría haber remedio. Isabel podía ir y venir a su antojo, tenía plena libertad, y su marido era muy educado con ella. Pero él se tomaba a sí mismo tan en serio que resultaba espantoso. Por debajo de toda su cultura, su inteligencia, su amenidad, su bondad, su tranquilidad, su conocimiento de la vida, yacía escondido su egoísmo como una serpiente en un campo de flores. Ella le había tomado en serio, pero no hasta ese punto. ¿Cómo podría haberlo hecho, cuando había conocido a un Osmond mejor? Ella tenía que pensar de él como él pensaba de sí mismo: como el mejor caballero de Europa. Así lo había considerado al principio, y de hecho esa era la razón por la que se había casado con él. Pero, cuando comenzó a ver todo lo que eso implicaba, se echó atrás, porque había más en ese vínculo de lo que ella había querido suscribir. Implicaba un soberano desprecio por todos, salvo por tres o cuatro personas de posición muy elevada a las que Osmond envidiaba, así como por todo, salvo por media docena de ideas propias. Tampoco era que Isabel tuviese nada que objetar a eso, y habría seguido avanzando a su lado durante un largo trecho, pues de esa manera él le mostraba tanto de la bajeza y mezquindad de la vida, le abría tanto los ojos a la estupidez, la depravación y la ignorancia de la humanidad, que Isabel había quedado debidamente impresionada por la infinita vulgaridad de todo y valoraba la virtud de conseguir que no le salpicara a uno. Pero, al parecer, resultaba que al final era para ese mundo bajo e innoble para el que había que vivir; nunca había que perderlo de vista, pero no para iluminarlo, convertirlo o redimirlo, sino para extraer de él el convencimiento de la propia superioridad de uno mismo. Por un lado, era un mundo despreciable, pero por otro te ofrecía el patrón por el que medirte. Osmond había hablado a Isabel de su renuncia, de su indiferencia, de la facilidad con que había prescindido de las habituales ayudas para triunfar, y a ella todo eso le había parecido admirable. Lo había considerado un ejemplo de grandiosa indiferencia y de exquisita independencia. Pero en realidad la indiferencia era la última de las cualidades de Osmond, pues Isabel nunca había visto a nadie que estuviese tan pendiente de los demás. Ella podía reconocer sin ambages que el mundo siempre le había interesado, y que el estudio de sus congéneres era su mayor y constante pasión. No obstante, no le habría importado renunciar a toda su curiosidad y simpatías con tal de disfrutar de una vida propia, siempre que la persona implicada la hubiese podido convencer de que con ello saldría ganando. Al menos tal era su convicción en esos momentos, y sin duda de esa manera todo habría sido más fácil que tener que preocuparse por la sociedad del modo en que Osmond lo hacía.

Él era incapaz de vivir sin la sociedad, e Isabel había terminado por darse cuenta de que en realidad nunca había podido. No había dejado de observarla desde su ventana incluso cuando parecía estar más distante de ella. Osmond tenía su ideal, del mismo modo que Isabel había intentado tener el suyo; pero resultaba muy extraño ver de qué formas tan distintas buscaban las personas la justicia. El ideal de Osmond era un concepto de alta prosperidad y propiedad, de una vida aristocrática que, como Isabel veía ahora con claridad, él creía haber llevado siempre, al

menos en esencia. Nunca había renunciado a él ni siquiera durante una hora; nunca se habría recuperado de la vergüenza de hacerlo. De nuevo no había nada malo en eso, y ella también podría haber estado de acuerdo, pero el problema estaba en que ambos atribuían ideas muy diferentes, asociaciones y deseos muy distintos, a las mismas fórmulas. El concepto que Isabel tenía de la vida aristocrática consistía sencillamente en la unión de un gran conocimiento con una gran libertad; el conocimiento te otorgaba un sentido del deber y la libertad un sentido del disfrute. Pero para Osmond era en conjunto una cuestión de formas, una actitud consciente y calculada. A él le gustaba lo antiguo, lo consagrado, lo transmitido; a ella también, pero se reservaba el derecho de utilizarlo a su antojo. Él sentía una enorme estima por la tradición; le había dicho en una ocasión que no había nada mejor que tener tradiciones y que, si uno sufría la desgracia de carecer de ellas, debía intentar conseguirlas de inmediato. Isabel sabía que lo que había querido decir era que ella no tenía tradiciones, mientras que él estaba mucho mejor provisto, aunque Isabel nunca había conseguido averiguar de dónde había sacado él las suyas. No obstante, Osmond poseía una gran colección de ellas; de eso no cabía la menor duda, como Isabel comenzó a comprobar al poco de casarse. Lo importante era actuar de acuerdo con las mismas, y esa importancia no solo le concernía a él, sino también a ella. Isabel tenía la vaga convicción de que, para que unas tradiciones pudieran servir a otra persona a la que no le pertenecieran, estas habían de ser de un orden muy superior. Pero aun así consintió a seguir esa indicación de que ella también debía marchar al son de esa solemne música que emanaba de unas épocas ignotas del pasado de su marido; ella, que en los últimos tiempos se había movido con un paso tan libre, tan poco metódico, tan sinuoso, tan opuesto al procesional. Había ciertas cosas que ambos debían hacer, cierta postura que debían adoptar, ciertas personas a las que debían conocer y otras a las que no. Cuando Isabel vio que ese rígido sistema se cerraba en torno suyo, por más que estuviera drapeado con bonitos tapizados, comenzó a poseerla esa sensación de oscuridad y asfixia de la que he hablado. Se sintió encerrada y rodeada por un intenso olor a moho y putrefacción. Se había resistido, por supuesto; al principio con humor, ironía, cariño; después, conforme la situación fue empeorando, con ansia, pasión, súplica. Había suplicado en pro de la libertad, de hacer lo que ambos quisieran, de no preocuparse por el aspecto ni la catalogación de su vida: en pro de otros instintos y anhelos, de otro ideal bien distinto.

Fue entonces cuando la verdadera personalidad de su marido, al sentirse atacado como nunca, salió a la luz y se irguió ante ella. Respondió a cuanto le había dicho solo con desprecio, e Isabel se dio cuenta de que se avergonzaba de ella hasta límites indescriptibles. ¿Qué pensaba de ella… que era baja, vulgar, innoble? Cuando menos, ahora sabía que carecía de tradiciones. Osmond no había previsto que ella fuese a manifestar semejante simpleza; sus ideas y sentimientos parecían, como mucho, dignos de un periódico radical o de un predicador unitario. Pero la verdadera ofensa, como Isabel terminó por percibir, radicaba en el hecho de que ella tuviese una mente con ideas propias. La mente de ella había de ser de él, había de estar unida a la suya como un pequeño jardincillo a un gran coto de caza. Él rastrillaría la tierra con suavidad y regaría las flores; él arrancaría las malas hierbas y de vez en cuando recogería un ramillete. Sería una bonita propiedad para un terrateniente con grandes posesiones. Osmond no quería que ella fuese estúpida. Por el contrario, si la apreciaba era precisamente porque era inteligente. Pero esperaba que su inteligencia estuviese por completo a su servicio y, lejos de desear que su entendimiento fuese nulo, se enorgullecía de que fuese tan receptiva. Esperaba que su esposa sintiera con él y por él, que hiciese suyas sus opiniones, sus ambiciones, sus preferencias, e Isabel se vio obligada a reconocer que eso tampoco era una gran insolencia por parte de un hombre tan completo y de un marido tan cariñoso, al menos a su peculiar estilo. Pero había ciertas cosas que ella nunca podría aceptar. Para empezar, había algunas que eran repugnantes y sucias. Isabel no era ninguna hija de puritanos, pero aun así creía en cosas como la castidad e incluso la decencia. Las creencias de Osmond, por el contrario, parecían ir mucho más allá de eso, y algunas de sus tradiciones hacían que Isabel tuviera que recogerse aún más las faldas. ¿Acaso todas las mujeres tenían amantes? ¿Todas mentían e incluso las mejores tenían precio? ¿Solo había tres o cuatro que no engañaban a sus maridos? Cuando Isabel oía tales cosas, sentía mayor desprecio por ellas que por los cotilleos de pueblo, un desprecio que se mantuvo fresco incluso en un ambiente tan viciado. Estaba la mancha de su cuñada, pero ¿es que su marido solo se basaba en la condesa Gemini para emitir tales juicios? Dicha dama mentía muy a menudo, y había practicado engaños que no eran solo verbales. Ya era bastante que esos hechos formasen parte de las tradiciones de Osmond: no había necesidad de generalizarlos de forma tan amplia. Fue el desprecio de Isabel por sus supuestos lo que hizo que él se irguiera ante ella. Osmond sentía un gran desprecio por muchas cosas, y resultaba apropiado que su esposa estuviese igual de bien equipada; pero que ella dirigiese la luz candente de su desdén hacia las ideas de su marido era un riesgo que no estaba dispuesto a aceptar. Osmond pensó que debería haber moldeado las emociones de Isabel antes de que llegaran a ese punto, y a esta no le costó nada

imaginar cómo le habrían ardido las orejas a su marido al descubrir que se había confiado demasiado. Cuando tenías una esposa que te provocaba tal sensación, no te quedaba más remedio que odiarla.

Isabel estaba profundamente convencida de que ese sentimiento de odio, que al principio había servido a Osmond de refugio y solaz, se había convertido en la principal ocupación y consuelo de su vida. Era un sentimiento muy intenso porque era sincero, sobre todo después de que Osmond tuviera la revelación de que, a fin de cuentas, ella podría prescindir de él. Si a la propia Isabel dicha idea le había causado un gran sobresalto, y en un principio le había parecido una especie de infidelidad, una predisposición a mancillarse ella también, ¿cuál no sería la magnitud del efecto que habría tenido en él? La respuesta era muy sencilla: Osmond la despreciaba; ella no tenía tradiciones, solo las miras morales de un pastor unitario. ¡La pobre Isabel, que nunca había sido capaz de entender el unitarismo! Esa era la certeza con la que llevaba algún tiempo viviendo y que ya había dejado de sopesar. ¿Qué le aguardaba ahora, qué le deparaba su futuro conyugal? Esa era la pregunta que se hacía constantemente. ¿Qué iba a hacer ella… o qué debería hacer? ¿A qué conducía que un hombre odiase a su mujer? Ella no le odiaba, de eso estaba segura, pues de vez en cuando sentía el arrebato de darle alguna agradable sorpresa. No obstante, a menudo se sentía asustada, y era entonces cuando le venía la idea, como ya he apuntado, de que era ella la que lo había engañado al principio de conocerse. En cualquier caso, su matrimonio era extraño, y su vida horrible. Hasta esa mañana él apenas le había hablado durante una semana entera, y había mantenido una actitud tan seca como un fuego consumido. Ella sabía que había una razón concreta para eso: estaba disgustado porque Ralph Touchett se hubiese quedado en Roma. Pensaba que Isabel veía demasiado a su primo, y hasta le había dicho una semana antes que era indecente que fuese a visitarlo a su hotel. Le habría dicho aún más si la invalidez de Ralph no hubiese convertido en algo brutal cualquier acusación que hubiera podido hacer contra él, pero tener que contenerse solo había servido para hacer aún mayor su disgusto. Isabel veía todo eso con la misma claridad con que veía la hora en la esfera del reloj de enfrente. Era perfectamente consciente de que el interés que sentía por su primo provocaba la ira de su marido tanto como si se hubiese visto obligado a encerrarla en su habitación… lo cual, estaba segura, era lo que le gustaría hacer. Isabel creía sinceramente que, en general, su actitud no era desafiante, pero desde luego tampoco podía fingir que Ralph le era indiferente. Estaba convencida de que se estaba muriendo y de que ya no volvería a verlo, y eso despertaba en ella una ternura hacia él como jamás había sentido antes. Nada le producía ya ningún placer. ¿Cómo podía sentir algún placer una mujer que sabía que había tirado su vida por la borda? Tenía un constante peso en el corazón, y lo veía todo bajo una luz lívida. Pero las visitas a Ralph eran una antorcha en la oscuridad, pues durante la hora que pasaban juntos el dolor que sentía por sí misma se convertía de algún modo en dolor por él. En esos momentos sentía como si Ralph fuera su hermano. Nunca había tenido un hermano, pero si lo hubiera tenido, y si ella hubiese estado abrumada por los problemas y él moribundo, le habría tenido el mismo cariño que le tenía a Ralph. Ah, sí; si Gilbert sentía celos, puede que tuviese motivos, pues su concepto de él no mejoraba después de haber estado con Ralph. No era que hablasen de él, ni que ella se quejara. Nunca lo nombraban: se trataba sencillamente de que Ralph era generoso y su marido no. Había algo en la conversación de Ralph, en su sonrisa, en el mero hecho de que estuviera en Roma, que hacía que el maldito círculo alrededor del cual caminaba Isabel se ensanchara de pronto. Hacía que percibiera lo bueno del mundo, que sintiera lo que podría haber sido su vida. Al fin y al cabo, Ralph era tan inteligente como Osmond… aparte de ser mucho mejor que él. Por lo tanto, Isabel consideraba que era una demostración de afecto ocultarle su sufrimiento. Se lo ocultaba con mucho cuidado, y mientras hablaban estaba constantemente cerrando cortinas y moviendo pantallas. De pronto revivió —nunca llegó a morir en ella— aquella mañana en el jardín de Florencia en la que Ralph la había advertido con respecto a Osmond. Solo tenía que cerrar los ojos y volver a ver el lugar, volver a oír su voz, volver a sentir el cálido y dulce aire. ¿Cómo pudo saberlo? Era todo un misterio, un prodigio de sabiduría. ¿Acaso era tan inteligente como Gilbert? Tenía que serlo, y mucho más, para haber llegado a esa conclusión. Gilbert nunca había sido tan profundo ni tan justo. Isabel le dijo entonces a Ralph que, al menos por boca por ella, nunca sabría si tenía razón en su advertencia; y eso es lo que procuraba hacer ahora. Era una tarea muy laboriosa, pues tenía mucho de pasional, exaltado y religioso. A veces las mujeres encuentran su religión en las actividades más extrañas, y en esos momentos Isabel, al interpretar un papel ante su primo, tenía la sensación de estar haciéndole un favor. Quizá lo habría sido si por un solo momento hubiera logrado engañarle. Pero, tal y como estaban las cosas, tal favor consistía básicamente en hacerle creer que en aquella ocasión Ralph la había herido mucho y que lo ocurrido le había puesto en evidencia, pero, como ella era tan generosa y él estaba tan enfermo, no le guardaba ningún rencor, e incluso tenía la consideración de no restregarle por la cara lo feliz que era. Mientras yacía en el sofá, Ralph sonreía para sus adentros, ante tan insólita muestra de consideración, pero la

perdonaba por haberlo perdonado. Isabel no quería darle el disgusto de que supiera que ella era infeliz; eso era lo importante, y daba igual que el saberlo hubiera servido para demostrar que él tenía razón.

Isabel permaneció durante largo tiempo en el silencioso salón incluso después de que el fuego se hubiese extinguido. No era de temer que pasara frío, ya que se hallaba en un estado febril. Oyó dar los cuartos y después las horas, pero en su vigilia no prestaba atención al tiempo. Su mente, asaltada por constantes visiones, mostraba una frenética actividad, y daba igual que las visiones le llegaran allí, donde las recibía sentada, que en la cama, donde solo fingiría estar descansando. Como he dicho, estaba convencida de que su actitud no era desafiante, y no había mejor prueba de ello que el hecho de quedarse allí buena parte de la noche intentando convencerse de que no había ninguna razón por la que Pansy no debiera casarse. Cuando el reloj dio las cuatro se levantó. Se disponía por fin a acostarse, pues hacía tiempo que la lámpara se había apagado y las velas se habían consumido. Pero, incluso entonces, se detuvo en mitad de la sala y se quedó contemplando una visión que había vuelto a recordar: la de su marido y madame Merle inadvertidamente unidos en actitud familiar.

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Tres noches después de aquello, Isabel llevó a Pansy a una gran fiesta a la que Osmond, que nunca asistía a bailes, no las acompañó. Pansy estaba tan encantada de ir a un baile como siempre; no iba con su carácter hacer generalizaciones, y no había hecho extensiva a otros placeres la severa prohibición que le habían impuesto sobre los amorosos. Si estaba aguardando al momento oportuno o esperaba poder embaucar a su padre, Pansy debía de haber previsto que lo conseguiría. No obstante, Isabel consideraba todo eso muy poco probable; más bien parecía que Pansy hubiese decidido sencillamente ser una buena chica. Nunca había tenido una ocasión tan propicia, y ella apreciaba las grandes ocasiones como correspondía. Se comportaba con la misma cortesía de siempre y controlaba sus vaporosas faldas con la misma atención; apretaba el ramillete con fuerza y contaba las flores una y otra vez. Hizo que Isabel se sintiera mayor, ya que hacía una eternidad que no experimentaba la menor emoción por asistir a una fiesta. Pansy fue muy admirada y no le faltaron parejas de baile, por lo que al poco de que llegaran dio a Isabel, que no estaba bailando, el ramillete para que se lo sujetara. Isabel llevaba varios minutos haciéndole ese favor cuando se dio cuenta de que tenía a Edward Rosier cerca. Este estaba delante de ella; había perdido su afable sonrisa y mostraba una expresión de férrea determinación marcial. Isabel habría sonreído ante ese cambio de aspecto, ya que Rosier siempre había olido más a heliotropo que a pólvora, de no haber sabido que en el fondo el suyo era un caso difícil. Él la miró un momento con expresión un tanto fiera, como para indicarle que era peligroso, y luego bajó la vista al ramo. Al inspeccionarlo su actitud se suavizó, y se apresuró a decir:

—Son todo pensamientos, así que tiene que ser de ella.

Isabel sonrió con amabilidad.

—Sí, es de ella. Me lo ha dado para que se lo sujete.

—¿Lo puedo sujetar yo un momento, señora Osmond? —preguntó el apesadumbrado joven.

—No, no me fío de usted. Tengo miedo de que no me lo devuelva.

—La verdad es que me temo que lo haría. Saldría corriendo de aquí con él. ¿No puedo, por lo menos, quedarme una flor?

Isabel dudó un momento y, sin dejar de sonreír, le ofreció el ramillete.

—Escójala usted mismo. Es una temeridad todo lo que hago por usted.

—Ojalá pudiese hacer aún más, señora Osmond —dijo Rosier con el monóculo en el ojo mientras escogía la flor cuidadosamente.

—Ni se le ocurra ponérsela en el ojal —le advirtió Isabel.

—Quiero que me la vea puesta. Se ha negado a bailar conmigo, pero quiero demostrarle que todavía creo en ella.

—Está muy bien que se lo demuestre a ella, pero no a todos los demás. Su padre le ha dicho que no baile con usted.

—¿Es eso todo lo que puede hacer usted por mí? Esperaba más de usted, señora Osmond —dijo el joven en un tono de simple constatación—. Al fin y al cabo, nuestra amistad se remonta a mucho tiempo atrás, casi a los días de nuestra inocente niñez.

—No me haga sentir tan vieja —replicó Isabel con paciencia—. Siempre saca ese tema y yo nunca lo niego, pero he de decirle que, por muy viejos amigos que seamos, si me hubiese hecho el honor de pedirme que me casara con usted, lo habría rechazado al momento.

—Entonces eso quiere decir que no siente usted el menor aprecio por mí. Diga sin tapujos que piensa que solo soy un vulgar mequetrefe parisino.

—Le aprecio mucho, pero no estoy enamorada de usted. Me refiero, por supuesto, a que no estoy enamorada de usted por Pansy.

—Muy bien, comprendo. Se compadece de mí… eso es todo.

Y Edward Rosier miró a su alrededor a través del monóculo con aire de indiferencia. Para él era toda una revelación enterarse de que no complacía a la gente todo lo que creía, pero al menos tenía el suficiente orgullo para no demostrar que consideraba dicha deficiencia como algo general.

Durante unos instantes Isabel no dijo nada. La actitud y aspecto de Rosier no tenían la dignidad de las grandes

tragedias, como ponía de relieve el monóculo, entre otras cosas. Pero de pronto se sintió conmovida porque, al fin y al cabo, su propia desdicha tenía algo en común con la de él, y más que nunca cayó en la cuenta de que tenía ante sí, de forma reconocible aunque no muy romántica, el hecho más conmovedor del mundo: el amor joven luchando contra la adversidad.

—¿De verdad sería muy bueno con ella? —preguntó finalmente en voz baja.

Él bajó los ojos con devoción y se llevó la pequeña flor que tenía entre los dedos a los labios. Luego miró a Isabel.

—Se compadece usted de mí; pero ¿no se compadece un poco de ella?

—No lo sé, no estoy segura. Ella disfrutará siempre de la vida.

—Depende de a lo que llame usted vida —afirmó el señor Rosier con mucha intención—. Seguro que no le gustará que la torturen.

—No le pasará nada de eso.

—Me alegra oírlo. Ella sabe lo que le conviene, ya verá.

—Creo que sí, y por eso nunca desobedecerá a su padre. Pero ya vuelve —añadió Isabel—, así que he de rogarle que se marche.

Rosier se quedó un momento hasta que apareció Pansy del brazo de su acompañante, y entonces solo permaneció el tiempo justo para mirarla a la cara. Después se marchó con la cabeza bien alta, y el modo en que realizó ese sacrificio a la conveniencia convenció a Isabel de que estaba muy enamorado.

Pansy, cuyo atuendo rara vez se descomponía al bailar, regresó con aspecto fresco y relajado después del ejercicio y, tras esperar un momento, volvió a coger el ramillete. Isabel la observó y vio que estaba contando las flores, lo cual le hizo decirse para sus adentros que sin duda había en juego fuerzas más profundas de las que había contemplado. Pansy había visto a Rosier retirarse, pero no dijo nada sobre él a Isabel; solo le habló de su pareja de baile después de que este hiciera una reverencia y se marchara; de la música, de la pista, y de la lamentable y poco frecuente desgracia de que ya se hubiera hecho un pequeño desgarrón en el vestido. No obstante, Isabel estaba segura de que había descubierto que su enamorado le había sustraído una flor, aunque no hacía falta saber eso para explicar la diligente gracilidad con la que Pansy respondió a la siguiente petición para bailar que recibió. Ese perfecto donaire cuando se estaba bajo una intensa presión formaba parte del gran esquema de las cosas. Pansy volvió a ser conducida a la pista de baile por un ruborizado joven, y esa vez se llevó el ramo. No llevaba mucho tiempo ausente cuando Isabel vio a lord Warburton avanzando entre la multitud. Al momento se le acercó y la saludó; no se veían desde el día anterior. Él miro a su alrededor, y a continuación preguntó:

—¿Dónde está la damita?

De ese modo inocente acostumbraba a referirse a la señorita Osmond.

—Está bailando —contestó Isabel—. Seguro que la ve por ahí.

Lord Warburton miró entre los que bailaban hasta que localizó a Pansy.

—Me ve, pero no reparará en mí —comentó entonces—. ¿No baila usted?

—Como puede ver, nadie me saca.

—¿Quiere bailar conmigo?

—Gracias, pero prefiero que lo haga con la damita.

—Una cosa no quita la otra, puesto que ella ya tiene pareja.

—No tiene pareja para todos los bailes, así que se puede reservar para ella. De ese modo, como ella baila con tanto brío, estará usted más descansado.

—Baila maravillosamente bien —dijo lord Warburton mientras seguía las evoluciones de Pansy con la mirada—. Ah, por fin —añadió—, me ha dedicado una sonrisa. —Allí estaba él, con su rostro atractivo, relajado e importante, y mientras Isabel lo observaba volvió a pensar que era extraño que un hombre de su valía se interesase por una damita. Le pareció una gran incongruencia, pues ni la pequeña fascinación que Pansy pudiera ejercer en él, ni la propia amabilidad, bondad o incluso la extrema y constante necesidad de entretenimiento de lord Warburton, bastaban para explicarlo—. Me gustaría bailar con usted —dijo al cabo de un momento, girándose hacia Isabel—, pero preferiría que hablásemos.

—Sí, es mejor, y más propio de su dignidad. Los grandes estadistas no deberían bailar valses.

—No sea cruel conmigo. En ese caso, ¿por qué me recomienda que baile con la señorita Osmond?

—Bueno, no es lo mismo. Si baila con ella, simplemente parecerá un amable detalle… para entretenerla. Si baila conmigo, parecerá que lo hace usted para divertirse.

—¿Acaso no tengo derecho a divertirme?

—No, cuando tiene sobre sus hombros el peso de todos los asuntos del Imperio británico.

—¡Al infierno el Imperio británico! Siempre se está usted riendo de mí.

—Diviértase hablando conmigo —dijo Isabel.

—No estoy seguro de que constituya una verdadera diversión. Es usted demasiado mordaz, y siempre tengo que estar defendiéndome. Además, esta noche parece tener más peligros de lo habitual. ¿De verdad que no quiere bailar?

—No puedo moverme de aquí, para que Pansy me encuentre.

Lord Warburton permaneció en silencio durante un instante.

—Es usted muy buena con ella —dijo de repente.

Isabel lo miró fijamente y sonrió.

—¿Se puede imaginar a alguien que no lo fuera?

—No, por supuesto que no. Sé lo encantadora que es. Pero usted debe de haber hecho mucho por ella.

—Me limito a hacer que salga conmigo —contestó Isabel, que seguía sonriendo—. Y me encargo de que lleve la ropa adecuada.

—Su compañía debe de ser de gran ayuda para ella. Usted habla con ella, le da consejos, la ayuda a desenvolverse.

—Sí, claro; si no es una rosa, por lo menos ha vivido cerca de una.

E Isabel se echó a reír, y también su acompañante, pero había cierta preocupación visible en el rostro de lord Warburton que impedía su plena hilaridad.

—Todos intentamos vivir lo más cerca posible de ella —dijo tras vacilar un momento.

Isabel se giró. Estaban a punto de traerle a Pansy de nuevo, y se alegró de contar con esa excusa. Sabemos lo mucho que apreciaba a lord Warburton, al que consideraba incluso más agradable de lo que la suma de sus méritos le otorgaban. Había algo en su amistad que parecía una especie de recurso en caso de tener cualquier imprevista necesidad; era como tener un gran saldo a favor en el banco. Isabel se sentía más feliz cuando él estaba en la misma estancia, y cierta tranquilidad cuando él se le acercaba. El sonido de su voz le recordaba la benevolencia de la naturaleza. Y sin embargo, pese a todo eso, no le gustaba tenerlo demasiado cerca, ni que diese tan por descontado que lo apreciaba. Eso le daba miedo, le provocaba rechazo, e intentaba impedirlo. Pensaba que, en el caso de que le pareciese que él se acercaba, por así decirlo, demasiado, debería surgir de ella el impulso de advertirle que mantuviese las distancias. Pansy volvió a ella con otro pequeño desgarrón en la falda, consecuencia inevitable del primero, que le mostró con expresión seria. Había demasiados caballeros de uniforme, que llevaban esas terribles espuelas que resultaban fatales para los vestidos de las damitas. Entonces se hizo evidente que las mujeres cuentan con innumerables recursos. Isabel se apresuró en arreglar los profanados ropajes de Pansy, para lo cual tanteó hasta encontrar un alfiler con el que reparar el desaguisado, al tiempo que sonreía y escuchaba el relato de las aventuras de la joven. Su atención y simpatía fueron manifiestas e inmediatas, además de directamente proporcionales a una sensación con la que no estaban relacionadas en absoluto: a la vívida conjetura que rondaba a Isabel en esos momentos de que lord Warburton estuviera intentando cortejarla. No se trataba tan solo de las palabras que acababa de decir, sino también de otras, llenas de continuas alusiones. En eso era en lo que estaba pensando mientras arreglaba el vestido de Pansy. Si así era, como Isabel se temía, estaba claro que lord Warburton lo hacía de forma involuntaria, sin darse cuenta de toda la atención que le prestaba. Pero eso no hacía la situación menos propicia ni menos imposible. Cuanto antes reanudara él la relación correcta con las cosas, mucho mejor. De inmediato lord Warburton comenzó a hablar con Pansy, para quien sin duda tuvo que resultar desconcertante ver que le dedicaba una sonrisa de casta devoción. Pansy contestó, como era habitual en ella, con cierto aire de concienzuda aplicación; él tenía que inclinarse mucho para hablar con la joven, mientras los ojos de Pansy, como también era habitual, recorrían de arriba abajo su robusta persona como si él se la ofreciera para exhibirla ante ella. Pansy siempre parecía un poco asustada, pero su miedo no era de esa clase que sugiere que te desagrada la otra persona; por el contrario, la joven tenía aspecto de saber que él sabía que a ella le agradaba. Isabel los dejó solos un rato y se dirigió a donde estaba una amiga a la que vio por allí cerca y con quien estuvo hablando hasta que comenzó la música del siguiente baile, para el que sabía que Pansy también estaba comprometida. La joven se unió a ella al cabo de un momento un poco sonrojada, e Isabel, que obedecía escrupulosamente la consigna de Osmond de que su hija debía depender por completo de ella, la entregó a modo de valioso préstamo temporal a su nueva pareja de baile. Isabel tenía sus propias ideas y reservas con respecto a esa cuestión. En ocasiones le daba la impresión de que el hecho de que Pansy se aferrara de esa forma tan exagerada a ella hacía que ambas resultaran ridículas. Pero Osmond le había hecho una

especie de retablo sobre cuál debía ser su posición como dueña de su hija, que consistía en alternar con gentileza entre la concesión y la restricción, y había ciertas indicaciones de Osmond que a Isabel le gustaba pensar que obedecía a pies juntillas. Quizá fuese porque, en lo tocante a algunas de esas indicaciones, el hecho de obedecerlas terminaba por reducirlas al absurdo.

Cuando Pansy se volvió a marchar, Isabel vio que lord Warburton se le acercaba de nuevo. Lo miró fijamente, como deseando poder adivinar sus pensamientos, pero él no parecía dar muestra alguna de confusión.

—Me ha prometido que luego bailará conmigo —dijo.

—Me alegro. Supongo que le habrá pedido el cotillón.

Él pareció un poco incómodo al oír eso.

—No, no le he pedido que me conceda ese baile, sino una cuadrilla.

—¡Ay, qué poco inteligente de su parte! —dijo Isabel casi enfadada—. Le dije a Pansy que se reservase el cotillón por si usted se lo pedía.

—¡Pobre damita, quién se lo iba a imaginar! —Y lord Warburton se echó a reír con toda franqueza—. Por supuesto, se lo pediré si usted quiere.

—¿Si yo quiero? A ver si va a resultar que solo baila con ella porque yo quiero…

—Tengo miedo de aburrirla. Parece tener a un montón de jóvenes apuntados en su carnet de baile.

Isabel bajó la mirada y comenzó a reflexionar rápidamente, mientras sentía con intensidad cómo lord Warburton la observaba, hasta el punto de que le dieron ganas de pedirle que dejara de hacerlo. Sin embargo, no lo hizo; al cabo de un momento, tras levantar la vista de nuevo, se limitó a afirmar:

—Le aseguro que no le entiendo.

—¿Qué es lo que no entiende?

—Me dijo hace diez días que le gustaría casarse con mi hijastra. ¡No puede haberlo olvidado!

—¿Cómo lo iba a olvidar? Precisamente esta mañana he escrito al señor Osmond comunicándoselo.

—Ah —dijo Isabel—. Pues no me ha dicho nada.

Lord Warburton balbuceó un poco.

—Es que… no he enviado la carta.

—No me diga que se le ha olvidado.

—No, es que no terminaba de gustarme. Cuesta bastante escribir una carta de ese tipo. Pero la enviaré esta noche.

—¿A las tres de la madrugada?

—Quiero decir más adelante, en el transcurso del día.

—Muy bien. Entonces, ¿aún quiere casarse con ella?

—Por supuesto.

—¿Y no le da miedo que pueda aburrirla? —Y como su interlocutor se la quedara mirando fijamente al oír esa pregunta, Isabel añadió—: Si no puede bailar con usted media hora, ¿cómo podrá bailar con usted toda la vida?

—Bueno —se apresuró a decir lord Warburton—, la dejaré que baile con otras personas. Con respecto al cotillón, la verdad es que pensaba que usted… que usted…

—¿Que lo bailaría con usted? Le he dicho que no pensaba bailar.

—En efecto. Por eso, cuando llegue el cotillón, podemos buscar algún rincón tranquilo en el que sentarnos a hablar.

—Es usted demasiado atento conmigo —dijo Isabel en tono serio.

Cuando llegó el cotillón, resultó que Pansy ya lo había concedido por su cuenta, al pensar con toda humildad que lord Warburton no tenía intención de pedírselo. Isabel recomendó a este que buscase otra pareja, pero él le aseguró que no bailaría con nadie salvo con ella. Sin embargo, como, pese a las reconvenciones de su anfitriona, Isabel ya había declinado otras invitaciones alegando que no le apetecía bailar, no le fue posible hacer una excepción en favor de lord Warburton.

—Después de todo, me da igual no bailar —dijo este—. Es un entretenimiento bárbaro: prefiero mucho más hablar.

Y le dio a entender que había encontrado justo el rincón que había estado buscando, un tranquilo recoveco en uno de los salones más pequeños, adonde la música les llegaría débilmente de manera que no entorpeciera su conversación. Isabel había decidido acceder a su plan, pues quería sentirse complacida. Salió del salón de baile con él, aunque sabía que su marido no quería que perdiese de vista a su hija en ningún momento. No obstante, se iba con el *prétendant* de esta, a lo cual Osmond no pondría ninguna objeción. Cuando salía del salón de baile, se encontró con Edward Rosier, que estaba en la puerta con los brazos cruzados mirando el baile con la actitud de un joven sin

ilusiones. Isabel se detuvo un momento y le preguntó si no bailaba.

—Por supuesto que no, si no puedo bailar con ella —contestó.

—Entonces lo mejor que puede hacer es marcharse —dijo Isabel en tono de estar dándole un buen consejo.

—No pienso irme hasta que se vaya ella.

Y dejó pasar a lord Warburton sin tan siquiera mirarle. El aristócrata, en cambio, sí que se había fijado en aquel joven melancólico, y preguntó a Isabel quién era su abatido amigo, comentando que le sonaba haberlo visto en alguna otra ocasión.

—Es el joven del que le he hablado, el que está enamorado de Pansy.

—Ah, sí, ya me acuerdo. Se le ve bastante mal.

—Razones no le faltan. Mi marido no quiere escucharle.

—¿Y eso por qué? —preguntó lord Warburton—. Parece inofensivo.

—No tiene mucho dinero, y tampoco es muy inteligente.

Lord Warburton escuchó con interés, y pareció quedar muy sorprendido por esa descripción de Edward Rosier.

—¡Vaya! —exclamó—. Pues parece un joven acomodado.

—Y lo es, pero mi marido es muy particular para esas cosas.

—Ah —dijo lord Warburton, y tras hacer una pausa se aventuró a preguntar—: ¿Cuánto dinero tiene?

—Unos cuarenta mil francos al año.

—¿Mil seiscientas libras? Ah, pero si eso está muy bien.

—Eso creo yo, pero mi marido tiene ideas más ambiciosas.

—Sí, ya me he dado cuenta de que su marido tiene ideas muy ambiciosas. ¿Y de verdad es idiota ese joven?

—¿Idiota? No, ni mucho menos. Es encantador. Yo misma estuve enamorada de él cuando él tenía doce años.

—Pues ahora no parece tener muchos más —replicó lord Warburton vagamente mientras miraba a su alrededor, tras lo cual añadió con más convicción—: ¿Qué le parece si nos sentamos aquí?

—Donde usted quiera.

La estancia era una especie de salón tocador, y estaba inundada por una matizada luz rosácea. Una dama y un caballero salieron de la misma al entrar ellos.

—Es muy amable de su parte que se interese tanto por el señor Rosier —dijo Isabel.

—Creo que lo han tratado muy mal. Tenía muy mala cara. Me pregunto qué puede afligirle tanto.

—Es usted un hombre justo —afirmó Isabel—. Tiene un pensamiento amable incluso para un rival.

Lord Warburton la miró con expresión sorprendida.

—¿Un rival? ¿Lo considera mi rival?

—Claro, habida cuenta de que ambos quieren casarse con la misma persona.

—Ya, pero como él no tiene ninguna posibilidad…

—Sea como sea, aprecio el que usted se ponga en su lugar. Demuestra que tiene imaginación.

—¿Me aprecia por eso? —preguntó lord Warburton mirándola de forma dubitativa—. ¿O más bien se está riendo de mí por eso?

—Sí, me estoy riendo de usted un poco. Pero también lo aprecio por ser alguien del que se puede una reír.

—Bien, en ese caso déjeme que me ponga aún más en el lugar de ese joven. ¿Qué cree que se podría hacer por él?

—Ya que he estado ensalzando su imaginación, le dejo que se lo imagine usted por sí mismo —contestó Isabel—. Pansy también lo apreciaría por eso.

—¿La señorita Osmond? Bueno, quiero pensar que ella ya me aprecia.

—Sí, y yo diría que mucho.

Lord Warburton esperó un momento mientras seguía observándola confuso.

—Entonces no la entiendo. ¿Quiere decir que la señorita Osmond siente cierto interés por él?

—Creo que ya le he dicho que así es.

Un rápido rubor surgió en el ceño de lord Warburton.

—Usted me dijo que ella solo haría lo que quisiera su padre, y como tengo la impresión de que él me preferiría a mí… —Hizo una pequeña pausa, y a continuación añadió, mientras seguía ruborizándose—: ¿Comprende?

—Sí, le dije que arde en deseos de complacer a su padre, y que probablemente sería capaz de cualquier cosa.

—Me parece un sentimiento muy correcto —dijo lord Warburton.

—Sin duda lo es. —Isabel se quedó en silencio durante unos instantes. La habitación seguía vacía, y el sonido de la

música les llegaba atenuado por las estancias intermedias. Al fin dijo—: Pero no me parece que sea el tipo de sentimiento al que un hombre querría deber el haber conseguido a su esposa.

—No lo sé. Si es una buena esposa y él cree que ella hace lo correcto…

—Claro, es normal que piense usted eso.

—Sí, no lo puedo evitar. Supongo que le parecerá algo muy británico.

—No. Creo que Pansy haría una gran boda si se casase con usted, y eso lo sabe usted mejor que nadie. Pero usted no está enamorado de ella.

—¡Sí que lo estoy, señora Osmond!

Isabel negó con la cabeza.

—Quiere creer que lo está mientras permanece aquí sentado conmigo, pero a mí no me lo parece.

—Reconozco que no soy como ese joven de la puerta, pero ¿qué hay de malo en ello? ¿Puede haber en el mundo alguien más adorable que la señorita Osmond?

—No, nadie. Pero el amor no tiene nada que ver con las buenas razones.

—No estoy de acuerdo. Estoy encantado de tener buenas razones.

—Claro que lo está, pero si estuviera enamorado de verdad no le importarían lo más mínimo.

—¡Ah… enamorado de verdad, enamorado de verdad! —exclamó lord Warburton al tiempo que se cruzaba de brazos, echaba la cabeza hacia atrás y se estiraba un poco—. Se le olvida que ya tengo cuarenta y dos años, y no puedo pretender ser el mismo que era antes.

—Bueno, si está seguro de lo que piensa, me parece muy bien —dijo Isabel.

Él no contestó nada. Siguió con la cabeza reclinada y la mirada perdida. Sin embargo, de pronto cambió de postura y se giró rápidamente hacia su amiga.

—¿Por qué es tan suspicaz, tan escéptica?

Isabel lo miró a los ojos, y durante unos momentos ambos se miraron fijamente. Si ella buscaba sentirse complacida, vio algo que la complació. En la expresión de él vio brillar la idea de que ella estaba inquieta, de que incluso quizá tenía miedo. Era una sospecha, no una esperanza, pero que aun así le confirmó a Isabel lo que quería saber. Lord Warburton nunca debía llegar a sospechar que Isabel creía detectar en su proposición de matrimonio a su hijastra la intención de estar más cerca de ella, ni que tal traición le pareciese ominosa. No obstante, esa breve e intensa mirada tuvo un significado más profundo de lo que ambos percibieron en esos momentos.

—Mi querido lord Warburton —dijo Isabel con una sonrisa—, por lo que a mí respecta, puede usted hacer lo que se le antoje.

Y, dicho eso, se levantó y se dirigió a la habitación adyacente, donde, a la vista de su acompañante, no tardó en ser abordada por dos caballeros, grandes personalidades de la sociedad romana que la saludaron como si hubiesen estado buscándola. Mientras conversaba con ellos, Isabel lamentó haberse marchado de su lado; parecía un poco como si estuviese huyendo, sobre todo porque lord Warburton no la había seguido. No obstante, se alegraba de que hubiera sido así, y de todos modos había quedado satisfecha. Lo estaba tanto que, cuando al volver al salón de baile se encontró con que Edward Rosier seguía plantado en la puerta, se detuvo y volvió a hablarle:

—Ha hecho bien en no marcharse, porque tengo buenas noticias para usted.

—Bien que las necesito —gimió el joven en voz baja—, sobre todo cuando la veo a usted en tan estrecha intimidad con él.

—No hable de él. Voy a hacer todo lo que pueda por usted. Me temo que no será mucho, pero intentaré hacer todo cuanto esté en mi mano.

Rosier la miró de soslayo con expresión sombría.

—¿Qué le ha hecho cambiar tan de repente?

—¡Que sea usted un estorbo para pasar por las puertas! —respondió Isabel, sonriéndole al tiempo que se alejaba.

Media hora más tarde se marchó con Pansy, y ambas damas tuvieron que esperar un rato a los pies de la escalera a que apareciese su carruaje, junto a otros muchos invitados que también se retiraban. Justo cuando su vehículo se aproximaba, lord Warburton salió de la casa y las ayudó a llegar a él. Se quedó un momento en la portezuela y preguntó a Pansy si lo había pasado bien, y esta, tras contestarle, se reclinó en el asiento con cierto aire de fatiga. Entonces Isabel se asomó por la ventanilla y, deteniéndolo con un movimiento de dedo, le murmuró con gentileza:

—No se olvide de enviarle la carta a su padre.

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La condesa Gemini a menudo se aburría terriblemente o, como ella misma decía, se aburría hasta la extinción. Sin embargo, no solo no se había extinguido, sino que luchaba con denuedo contra su destino, que había sido casarse con un florentino poco complaciente empeñado en vivir en su ciudad natal, en la que gozaba de la consideración que correspondía a un caballero cuya habilidad para perder a las cartas se acompañaba de un talante nada agradable. El conde Gemini ni siquiera caía bien a aquellos que le ganaban en el juego, y su apellido, aunque tenía cierta cotización cuantificable en Florencia, al igual que las distintas monedas de los antiguos estados italianos carecía de valor en otras partes de la península. En Roma no era más que un florentino insulso y estúpido, por lo cual no era de extrañar que no estuviera interesado en visitar con frecuencia un lugar en el que, para salir bien parado, su necedad precisaba de más explicaciones de las convenientes. La condesa vivía con el ojo puesto en Roma, por lo que el invariable disgusto de su vida era no tener residencia allí. Le daba vergüenza decir las pocas veces que le habían permitido visitar esa ciudad, y apenas le servía de consuelo que hubiera otros miembros de la nobleza florentina que jamás habían estado en Roma. Así pues, lo único que podía decir era que iba siempre que se le presentaba la oportunidad. O más bien no era lo único, sino lo único que, según ella, podía decir. De hecho, tenía mucho más que decir al respecto, y a menudo exponía las razones por las que odiaba Florencia y quería terminar sus días a la sombra de San Pedro. No obstante, son razones que no nos conciernen mucho, y que por lo general se resumían en la afirmación de que Roma, en definitiva, era la Ciudad Eterna, mientras que Florencia solo era un bonito lugar como cualquier otro. Al parecer, la condesa necesitaba relacionar la idea de eternidad con sus distracciones. Estaba convencida de que la vida social era infinitamente más interesante en Roma, donde durante todo el invierno coincidías con las grandes personalidades en las fiestas nocturnas. En Florencia no había celebridades, al menos ninguna que ella supiera. Desde la boda de su hermano su impaciencia había aumentado sobremanera, pues estaba segura de que la esposa de Osmond llevaba una vida más brillante que la suya. No era tan intelectual como Isabel, pero lo era lo bastante para hacer justicia a Roma: no a las ruinas y a las catacumbas, quizá ni siquiera a los monumentos y a los museos, o a las ceremonias religiosas y al paisaje, pero sin duda sí a todo lo demás. Oía hablar mucho de su cuñada y sabía perfectamente que Isabel lo estaba pasando muy bien. Lo había comprobado por sí misma en la única ocasión en que había gozado de la hospitalidad del palazzo Roccanera. Había pasado una semana allí durante el primer invierno tras la boda de su hermano, pero después no la habían animado a repetir tan agradable estancia. Era perfectamente consciente de que Osmond no la quería allí, pero habría ido de todas formas ya que, al fin y al cabo, le importaba dos cominos lo que pensara Osmond. Era su marido el que no la dejaba ir, y estaba la cuestión monetaria, que siempre era un problema. Isabel había sido muy amable con ella, y la condesa, a la que le había caído bien su cuñada desde el primer momento, no se había dejado cegar de envidia por los méritos personales de aquella. Siempre había sabido que se llevaba mejor con las mujeres inteligentes que con las tontas como ella: las tontas nunca llegaban a entender su sabiduría, mientras que las inteligentes, las que lo eran de verdad, siempre entendían su tontería. Tenía la impresión de que, pese a sus diferencias generales en aspecto y estilo, Isabel y ella compartían un terreno común en el que terminarían por encontrarse. No era muy grande, pero era firme, y ambas lo reconocerían en cuanto estuviesen en él. Y, además, con respecto a la señora Osmond, la condesa vivía bajo el influjo de estar llevándose siempre una agradable sorpresa, ya que constantemente esperaba que Isabel la mirase con desprecio, y con la misma constancia comprobaba que dicha operación quedaba pospuesta. Se preguntaba cuándo comenzaría por fin, como se esperan los fuegos artificiales, o la Cuaresma, o la temporada de ópera; tampoco es que le importara mucho, pero la intrigaba qué era lo que la mantenía en suspenso. Su cuñada solo le dedicaba miradas de igual a igual, y expresaba por la pobre condesa tan poco desprecio como admiración. En realidad a Isabel se le habría ocurrido despreciarla en la misma medida en que habría juzgado moralmente a un saltamontes. No era que la hermana de su marido le fuese indiferente; por el contrario, le tenía un poco de miedo. No dejaba de asombrarla, y la consideraba una mujer en verdad insólita. Le parecía que la condesa no tenía alma; era como un cascarón reluciente y raro, de superficie pulida y labios muy rosados, de cuyo interior salía un extraño sonido, como de cascabel, al agitarla. Ese sonido era al parecer el principio espiritual de la condesa, como un pequeño fruto seco daba tumbos en

su interior. Era demasiado extraña para despreciarla, y demasiado anómala para hacer comparaciones. Isabel la habría vuelto a invitar (al conde ni pensarlo), pero Osmond, después de que contrajeran matrimonio, no tuvo el menor reparo en decirle con toda franqueza que Amy era una idiota de la peor especie: una idiota cuya imbecilidad tenía la misma incontinencia que la genialidad. En otra ocasión dijo que no tenía corazón, para añadir al momento que lo había repartido todo en pequeñas porciones, como si fuese una tarta de bodas escarchada. El hecho de que no se lo hubieran pedido suponía sin lugar a dudas otro de los obstáculos que habían impedido que la condesa volviese a Roma pero, en el período del que esta historia ha de ocuparse ahora, obraba en su poder una invitación para pasar varias semanas en el palazzo Roccanera. La propuesta había partido del propio Osmond, el cual había escrito a su hermana diciéndole que debía prepararse para comportarse con mucha calma. Soy incapaz de decir si la condesa captó en esa frase todo el significado que él pretendía, pero de cualquier forma aceptó la invitación. Además, sentía curiosidad, pues una de las impresiones que había sacado de su anterior visita era que su hermano había encontrado la horma de su zapato. Antes de la boda había compadecido a Isabel, tanto que hasta había considerado seriamente —si es que alguna vez consideraba algo en serio— la posibilidad de prevenirla. Pero lo había dejado estar y, al cabo de un tiempo, se tranquilizó a ese respecto. Osmond se comportaba con la misma altanería de siempre, pero no parecía que su esposa fuera a ser una víctima fácil. La condesa no tenía muy buen sentido de la medida, pero sí la impresión de que, si Isabel llegara a erguirse, ella sería el espíritu más alto de los dos. Lo que quería averiguar era si Isabel se había erguido. Le produciría un inmenso placer ver a Osmond superado.

Varios días antes de que partiera hacia Roma, un sirviente le llevó una tarjeta de visita que contenía la sencilla inscripción «Henrietta C. Stackpole». La condesa se llevó las yemas de los dedos a la frente, pero no recordó conocer a dicha persona. Entonces el sirviente señaló que la dama en cuestión le había pedido que le dijera que, si la condesa no identificaba su nombre, la reconocería a ella en cuanto la viera. De hecho, cuando se presentó ante su visitante ya había recordado que en una ocasión había visto a una escritora en casa de la señora Touchett, la única mujer de letras que había conocido en su vida… es decir, la única contemporánea, ya que ella era hija de una poetisa difunta. Reconoció a la señorita Stackpole al instante, sobre todo porque esta no parecía haber cambiado en absoluto, y la condesa, que era de natural bondadoso, consideró que estaba muy bien ser visitada por alguien con ese tipo de distinción. Se preguntó si la señorita Stackpole habría ido a verla por su madre, si habría oído hablar de la Corinne americana. Su madre no se parecía en absoluto a aquella amiga de Isabel; la condesa vio enseguida que esta era mucho más moderna, y quedó impresionada ante los progresos que se estaban produciendo, sobre todo en países lejanos, en lo relativo al carácter (esto es, al carácter profesional) de las damas literatas. En vida su madre acostumbraba a llevar un echarpe romano sobre los desnudos hombros, tímidamente liberados del prieto terciopelo negro (¡ay, aquellas ropas antiguas!), así como una corona de laurel dorada sobre los numerosos y brillantes rizos de su cabeza. Hablaba en un tono suave y vago con el acento de sus antepasados criollos, como ella misma siempre confesaba; suspiraba mucho y no era nada emprendedora. En cambio, la condesa observó que Henrietta iba siempre abotonada hasta arriba y con el pelo recogido en un compacto trenzado; había algo enérgico y profesional en su aspecto, y su actitud resultaba natural de una forma casi concienzuda. Era tan imposible imaginársela emitiendo un vago suspiro como echar una carta al correo sin dirección. La condesa no tuvo más remedio que concluir que la corresponsal del *Interviewer* estaba mucho más al día que la Corinne americana. La señorita Stackpole le explicó que acudía a ella porque era la única persona que conocía en Florencia, y cuando visitaba una ciudad desconocida le gustaba ver cosas que se escapaban a los simples turistas. También conocía a la señora Touchett, pero se hallaba en Estados Unidos y además, aunque hubiese estado en Florencia, Henrietta tampoco habría ido a molestarla, ya que no sentía mucha admiración por ella.

—¿Quiere decir con eso que la siente por mí? —preguntó la condesa con gracia.

—Bueno, a usted la aprecio más que a ella —dijo la señorita Stackpole—. Creo recordar que cuando la conocí me pareció usted muy interesante. No sé si sería pura casualidad o si es su estilo habitual, pero el caso es que me impresionó mucho lo que dijo, tanto que hasta después lo utilicé en un artículo.

—¡Válgame Dios! —exclamó la condesa, mirándola fijamente y casi asustada—. No tenía la menor idea de que hubiese dicho algo interesante. Ojalá lo hubiera sabido en su momento.

—Era lo que dijo sobre la situación de las mujeres en esta ciudad —explicó la señorita Stackpole—. Fue muy revelador.

—La situación de la mujer aquí es muy incómoda. ¿Es eso a lo que se refiere? ¿Y dice que lo escribió y lo publicó? —preguntó la condesa—. ¡Tiene que enseñármelo!

—Si quiere puedo escribirles para que le envíen un ejemplar —contestó Henrietta—. No mencioné su nombre, solo dije que se trataba de una dama de alta alcurnia y cité su opinión.

La condesa se echó rápidamente hacia atrás mientras levantaba sus manos entrelazadas.

—¿Sabe que lamento que no mencionara mi nombre? Me habría gustado verlo en los periódicos. Ya no me acuerdo de cuál era mi opinión, porque tengo tantas… Pero desde luego no me avergüenzo de ellas. No soy como mi hermano… supongo que lo conoce, ¿no?, que cree que es una especie de escándalo aparecer en los periódicos. Si alguna vez le citara usted, nunca se lo perdonaría.

—No tiene por qué. Su hermano no tiene por qué temer: no pienso nombrarlo nunca —afirmó la señorita Stackpole con desabrida aspereza—. Esa es otra razón por la que quería venir a verla —añadió—. Como sabe, el señor Osmond está casado con mi mejor amiga.

—Es verdad, usted es amiga de Isabel. Estaba intentando recordar lo que sabía de usted.

—Me alegra que se me conozca por eso —afirmó Henrietta—. Pero es justo como su hermano no quiere que se me conozca. Ha intentado romper mi amistad con Isabel.

—Pues no lo consienta —dijo la condesa.

—De eso es de lo que quería hablarle. Voy a ir a Roma.

—¡Yo también! —exclamó la condesa—. ¡Podemos ir juntas!

—Será un placer. Y en la crónica del viaje la nombraré a usted como mi acompañante.

La condesa saltó del sillón y se sentó en el sofá junto a su visitante.

—Tiene que enviarme el periódico. A mi marido no le gustará, pero tampoco tiene por qué verlo. Además, no sabe leer.

Los grandes ojos de Henrietta se abrieron inmensos.

—¿Que no sabe leer? ¿Puedo poner eso en la carta?

—¿En qué crónica?

—En la crónica para el *Interviewer*, mi periódico.

—Sí, póngalo si quiere, y cite también su nombre. ¿Se va a alojar con Isabel?

Henrietta levantó la cabeza y observó en silencio a su anfitriona durante un instante.

—No me lo ha pedido. Le escribí para decirle que iba a ir, pero me contestó que me reservaría una habitación en una pensión, sin darme ninguna razón.

La condesa la escuchaba con gran interés.

—La razón es Osmond —comentó de forma muy elocuente.

—Isabel tendría que ponerse firme —dijo la señorita Stackpole—. Me temo que ha cambiado mucho. Ya le advertí que le pasaría.

—Lamento oír eso. Esperaba que ella encontraría la forma de hacer las cosas a su modo. ¿Y por qué no le cae usted bien a mi hermano? —añadió ingenuamente la condesa.

—Ni lo sé ni me importa. Me parece estupendo si no le caigo bien. Además, tampoco pretendo caerle bien a todo el mundo. No tendría muy buen concepto de mí misma si le cayera bien a ciertas personas. Un periodista no puede aspirar a hacer bien las cosas si no despierta grandes odios: es la forma que tiene de saber si su trabajo va por buen camino. Lo mismo pasa con una dama. Pero no me lo esperaba de Isabel.

—¿Quiere decir que ella la odia? —preguntó la condesa.

—No lo sé, y es lo que quiero averiguar. Para eso voy a Roma.

—¡Vaya, qué tarea más fatigosa! —exclamó la condesa.

—No me escribe del mismo modo que antes, y se nota enseguida que algo ha cambiado. Si sabe usted algo —prosiguió la señorita Stackpole—, me gustaría conocerlo de antemano para decidir el curso de acción que he de tomar.

La condesa adelantó el labio inferior y se encogió de hombros gradualmente.

—Apenas sé nada. Veo muy poco a Osmond y casi nunca tengo noticias suyas. Parece que le gusto tan poco como usted.

—Y eso que no es usted periodista —dijo Henrietta en tono pensativo.

—Bueno, pero le sobran razones. Aun así, me han invitado, y voy a alojarme en su casa.

Y la condesa sonrió casi con fiereza; su exultación, en esos momentos, no tuvo para nada en cuenta la decepción de la señorita Stackpole.

No obstante, esta se lo tomó con mucha calma.

—Yo no me habría quedado con ellos aunque Isabel me lo hubiera pedido. Bueno… creo que no me habría quedado, así que me alegro de no haber tenido que tomar una decisión. Habría sido una cuestión muy complicada. No me hubiera gustado estar separada de ella, pero tampoco me habría sentido a gusto bajo su techo. Hospedarme en una pensión ya me está bien. Pero eso no es todo.

—Roma está muy bien ahora —dijo la condesa—. Hay todo tipo de personas interesantes. ¿Ha oído hablar de lord Warburton?

—¿Que si he oído hablar de él? Lo conozco muy bien. ¿De verdad lo considera muy interesante? —preguntó Henrietta.

—No lo conozco, pero tengo entendido que es un *grand seigneur*. Le hace la corte a Isabel.

—¿Que le hace la corte?

—Eso he oído, pero no conozco los detalles —dijo la condesa en tono ligero—. De todas formas, Isabel no corre peligro.

Henrietta miró fijamente a su interlocutora sin decir nada durante unos instantes. Luego preguntó de sopetón:

—¿Cuándo se marcha a Roma?

—Me temo que aún falta una semana.

—Entonces me iré mañana —dijo Henrietta—. Creo que será mejor que no espere.

—Vaya, cuánto lo siento, pero es que me están haciendo unos vestidos. Tengo entendido que Isabel no para de organizar recepciones. Pero la veré allí. Iré a visitarla a su pensión. —Henrietta permaneció en silencio, absorta en sus propios pensamientos, hasta que de pronto la condesa exclamó—: ¡Ay, pero si no vamos juntas, usted no podrá describir nuestro viaje!

A la señorita Stackpole no pareció afectarla esta observación. Estaba pensando en otra cosa, que al poco expresó en palabras:

—Creo que no acabo de entender qué es lo que opina usted de lord Warburton.

—¿Lo que opino? Pues que es muy agradable, eso es todo.

—¿Le parece agradable cortejar a mujeres casadas? —preguntó Henrietta con una claridad inaudita.

La condesa se quedó mirándola fijamente, y luego soltó una fuerte carcajada.

—Está claro que todos los hombres agradables lo hacen. Cásese y lo comprobará —añadió.

—Esa sola idea bastaría para que no me casase —afirmó la señorita Stackpole—. Querría estar con mi propio marido, no con el de otra. ¿Cree que Isabel es culpable… culpable de…?

Y se interrumpió mientras buscaba la expresión adecuada.

—¿Culpable? No, no, o al menos espero que aún no. Lo único que digo es que Osmond es muy aburrido, y que, por lo que tengo entendido, lord Warburton pasa mucho tiempo en la casa. Me temo que la haya escandalizado.

—No, solo estoy preocupada —dijo Henrietta.

—¡Ah… no está siendo muy benévola con Isabel! Debería tener más confianza en ella. Ya sé lo que vamos a hacer —añadió la condesa rápidamente—. Si así se va a quedar más tranquila, me encargaré de quitarle a lord Warburton de encima.

En un primer momento, la señorita Stackpole se limitó a contestar con una profunda y solemne mirada.

—No me entiende —dijo al cabo de un instante—. No estoy pensando lo que usted se imagina. No estoy preocupada por Isabel en ese sentido. Lo único que me preocupa es que sea infeliz, y eso es lo que quiero averiguar.

La condesa giró la cabeza una docena de veces con aspecto impaciente y sarcástico.

—Puede que lo sea. A mí me encantaría saber si Osmond lo es.

La señorita Stackpole había empezado a aburrirla un poco.

—Si Isabel ha cambiado realmente, esa debe de ser la razón de fondo —continuó Henrietta.

—Ya lo comprobará. Seguro que ella se lo dice —dijo la condesa.

—Ah… tal vez no me lo diga… ¡y eso es lo que me da miedo!

—Bueno, si Osmond no está divirtiéndose… a su antigua manera, puedo jactarme de decir que me daré cuenta enseguida —replicó la condesa.

—Eso me da igual —dijo Henrietta.

—¡Pero a mí no! Si Isabel es infeliz, lo siento mucho por ella, pero no hay nada que yo pueda hacer al respecto. Podría decirle algo que la pondría aún peor, pero nada que le sirviera de consuelo. ¿A santo de qué se casó con él?

Tendría que haberme hecho caso y librarse de él. No obstante, la perdonaré si descubro que le ha puesto las cosas difíciles a mi hermano, pero si simplemente se ha dejado pisotear, no creo que pueda compadecerla jamás. De todas formas, no creo que eso sea muy probable. Espero descubrir que, aunque ella sea desdichada, al menos lo habrá hecho desdichado a él también.

Henrietta se levantó. Como era natural, tales expectativas le parecían terribles. Creía sinceramente que no tenía el menor deseo de que el señor Osmond fuese infeliz; de hecho ni siquiera se molestaba en albergar tales fantasías. En general, estaba bastante decepcionada con la condesa, cuya mente se movía en un círculo más limitado del que había esperado, aunque sin perder su capacidad para la ordinariez.

—Lo mejor sería que se amaran —dijo Henrietta en tono edificante.

—Imposible. Él es incapaz de amar a nadie.

—Eso me figuraba. Y solo sirve para que me preocupe aún más por Isabel. Decidido: me voy mañana.

—Desde luego a Isabel no le faltan amigos fieles —dijo la condesa con una sonrisa muy vívida—. Me reafirmo en que no la compadezco.

—Aunque quizá no pueda ayudarla —continuó la señorita Stackpole, como si lo mejor fuese no hacerse muchas ilusiones.

—Pero lo habrá intentado de todos modos, lo cual ya es algo. Creo que para eso ha venido de Estados Unidos —añadió la condesa de repente.

—Sí, porque quiero cuidarla —respondió Henrietta con serenidad.

Su anfitriona le sonrió mientras la miraba con sus pequeños ojos iluminados, las aletas de la nariz palpitantes, las mejillas coloreadas por un repentino rubor.

—Eso es muy bonito, *c'est bien gentil!* ¿No es lo que llaman amistad?

—No sé cómo lo llaman, pero pensé que lo mejor que podía hacer era venir.

—Isabel es muy dichosa… muy afortunada —prosiguió la condesa—. Tiene a otros que se preocupan por ella… —Y de pronto estalló en un arrebato—: ¡Es más afortunada que yo! Soy tan desdichada como ella… porque tengo un marido muy malo, mucho peor que Osmond. Y encima no tengo amigos. Creía que los tenía, pero han desaparecido. Nadie, ni hombre ni mujer, haría por mí lo que ha hecho usted por ella.

Henrietta quedó conmovida, pues esa amarga queja surgía de su naturaleza más profunda. Miró a su interlocutora un momento y dijo:

—Mire, condesa, estoy dispuesta a hacer por usted todo lo que quiera. Puedo esperar para que viajemos juntas.

—No se preocupe —contestó la otra cambiando rápidamente de tono—. ¡Usted solo descríbame en su periódico!

No obstante, antes de marcharse Henrietta tuvo que explicarle que no podía incluir datos ficticios en el relato de su viaje a Roma. La señorita Stackpole era una reportera estrictamente veraz. Tras dejar a la condesa, se dirigió al Lungarno, el soleado muelle junto al amarillento río donde se alinean los hostales de alegres fachadas que los turistas tan bien conocen. Con anterioridad ya había aprendido a moverse por las calles de Florencia (era muy rápida para ese tipo de cosas), así que giró con paso decidido para salir de la pequeña plaza que constituye el acceso al puente de la Santísima Trinidad. Continuó hacia la izquierda, en dirección al Ponte Vecchio, y se detuvo delante de uno de los hoteles que dan a esa maravillosa estructura. Allí sacó una pequeña cartera de la que extrajo una tarjeta y un lápiz, y, tras meditar unos instantes, escribió unas pocas palabras. Como tenemos el privilegio de poder mirar por encima de su hombro, al ejercerlo leeremos la siguiente petición: «¿Podría verle un momento esta tarde para tratar un asunto muy importante?». Henrietta añadía que a la mañana siguiente partía para Roma. Armada con ese documento, se acercó al portero, que había ocupado su puesto en la entrada, y le preguntó si el señor Goodwood se encontraba en el establecimiento. El portero contestó, como los porteros contestan siempre, que el señor había salido hacía unos veinte minutos, tras lo cual Henrietta le dio la tarjeta y pidió que le fuese entregada a su regreso. Dejó el hostal y prosiguió su camino a lo largo del muelle hasta llegar al severo pórtico de los Uffizi, a través del cual alcanzó la entrada de la famosa galería de pinturas. Tras acceder al interior del edificio, subió por las grandes escaleras que conducen a las salas superiores. El largo corredor por el que se accede a las mismas, con una cristalera a un lado y decorado con bustos antiguos, presentaba un aspecto vacío en el que la intensa luz del invierno titilaba sobre el suelo de mármol. La galería de los Uffizi es muy fría, y durante las semanas de mediados de invierno recibe muy pocas visitas. Puede que hasta el momento la señorita Stackpole no se nos haya mostrado como una mujer apasionada en su búsqueda de la belleza artística, pero sin duda tenía sus preferencias y obras más admiradas. Una de estas últimas era el pequeño Correggio que hay en la sala de la Tribuna, que muestra a la Virgen arrodillada delante del sagrado niño, el cual yace

en un lecho de paja y se regocija y gorjea ante las palmas que le hace su madre. Henrietta sentía una especial devoción por esa escena íntima, que consideraba el cuadro más hermoso del mundo. Solo iba a pasar tres días en Florencia en su trayecto de Nueva York a Roma, pero aun así había decidido que no debía permitir que transcurriesen sin hacer una nueva visita a su obra de arte favorita. Tenía un elevado concepto de la belleza en todas sus formas, y ello implicaba un gran número de obligaciones intelectuales. Cuando se disponía a entrar en la Tribuna, salía un caballero lo que hizo que Henrietta lanzase una pequeña exclamación: ante ella estaba Caspar Goodwood.

—Acabo de estar en su hotel —le dijo—, y le he dejado una tarjeta.

—Me siento muy honrado —respondió él, como si de verdad lo pensase.

—No lo he hecho por hacerle ningún honor. Ya le he visitado en otras ocasiones y sé que no le hace mucha gracia. Era para hablarle acerca de un asunto.

Caspar Goodwood miró un momento la hebilla del sombrero de Henrietta.

—Estaré encantado de escuchar lo que tenga que decirme.

—A usted no le gusta hablar conmigo —dijo Henrietta—, pero me trae sin cuidado. No hablo con usted para entretenerle. Le he escrito unas líneas pidiéndole que fuera a verme, pero ya que nos hemos encontrado aquí, aprovecharé la ocasión.

—Ya me iba —afirmó Goodwood—, pero por supuesto me esperaré —añadió de forma cortés pero sin entusiasmo.

No obstante, Henrietta nunca esperaba recibir grandes muestras de simpatía, y estaba tan preocupada que agradeció que estuviese dispuesto a escucharla de la forma que fuera. Aun así, primero le preguntó si había visto todos los cuadros.

—De sobra. Llevo aquí una hora.

—No sé si habrá visto mi Correggio —dijo Henrietta—. He venido a propósito para contemplarlo —continuó mientras entraba en la Tribuna acompañada por él, que la seguía con paso más lento.

—Supongo que lo habré visto, pero no sabía que fuera de usted. No suelo recordar los cuadros… sobre todo los de ese tipo.

Henrietta le había señalado su obra favorita, y él le preguntó si era de Correggio de lo que quería hablarle.

—No —contestó ella—, se trata de algo mucho menos armonioso. —Tenían la pequeña y reluciente sala, un espléndido receptáculo de tesoros, para ellos solos, ya que únicamente había un vigilante que rondaba cerca de la Venus de Médici—. Quiero que me haga un favor —explicó la señorita Stackpole.

Caspar Goodwood frunció un poco el ceño, pero no pareció avergonzarse por demostrar el escaso agrado que le producía. Su rostro era el de un hombre mucho mayor que el del amigo que conocimos en su momento.

—Estoy convencido de que va a ser algo que no me gustará —dijo en voz bastante alta.

—No, no creo que le guste. Si le gustara, no sería un favor.

—Bien, veamos de qué se trata —continuó él en el tono de alguien consciente de los límites de su paciencia.

—Dirá usted que no hay ninguna razón por la que deba hacerme un favor, y la verdad es que solo conozco una: el hecho de que, si usted me dejara, yo le haría encantada alguno. —Su tono suave y preciso, en el que no había ninguna intención efectista, resultaba muy sincero, por lo que su interlocutor, pese a seguir mostrando un aspecto severo, no pudo evitar que le conmoviese. No obstante, cuando algo lo conmovía no solía demostrarlo de la forma habitual; ni se sonrojaba, ni apartaba la mirada, ni parecía azorado. Tan solo prestaba mayor atención, y daba la impresión de considerar las cosas con mayor intensidad. Así pues, Henrietta siguió a lo suyo sin ser consciente de haber conseguido ninguna ventaja—: De hecho, puedo decirle ahora, y creo que es buen momento, que si alguna vez lo he molestado, como creo que en ocasiones he hecho, es porque sabía que estaría dispuesta a soportar las molestias que usted me pudiera causar. Yo le he molestado, sin duda… pero también me tomaría las molestias que hiciesen falta por usted.

Goodwood vaciló un instante.

—Ahora se está tomando muchas molestias.

—Sí… algunas. Quiero que considere si de verdad es una buena idea que vaya usted a Roma.

—¡Sabía que era eso lo que me iba a decir! —exclamó él con cierta tosquedad.

—Entonces, ¿ya lo ha pensado?

—Claro que sí, y muy detenidamente. Le he dado muchas vueltas. De otro modo, no habría llegado hasta aquí. Por eso me quedé dos meses en París, para poder pensarlo.

—Me da la impresión de que ha decidido hacer lo que más le apetecía. Ha decidido que es mejor ir a Roma porque

es una idea que le atrae mucho más.

—¿Mejor para quién? —le preguntó Goodwood.

—Para usted, en primer lugar, y después para la señora Osmond.

—No, para ella no será ni bueno ni malo. No me hago tantas ilusiones.

—Pero la cuestión es: ¿no la perjudicará?

—No veo por qué tendría que afectarla. No significo nada para ella. Pero, si quiere saberlo, sí que me gustaría verla.

—Ya, y por eso va.

—Pues claro. ¿Qué mejor razón podría haber?

—¿Y de qué le va a servir a usted? Eso es lo que quiero saber —dijo la señorita Stackpole.

—Eso es justo lo que no sabría decirle. Es a lo que estuve dando tantas vueltas en París.

—Hará que se sienta más desdichado.

—¿Qué quiere decir… «más»? —preguntó Goodwood con bastante severidad—. ¿De dónde se saca que soy desdichado?

—Bueno —contestó Henrietta tras dudar un momento—, no parece que se haya interesado nunca por nadie más.

—¿Y cómo puede saber lo que me interesa? —exclamó él al tiempo que se sonrojaba intensamente—. En estos momentos lo único que me interesa es ir a Roma.

Henrietta lo miró en silencio con expresión triste, pero aun así luminosa.

—Bien —comentó al fin—, solo quería decirle lo que pienso, porque no me lo podía quitar de la cabeza. Por supuesto usted pensará que no es asunto mío; pero por ese mismo principio, nada es asunto de nadie.

—Es muy amable de su parte, y le estoy muy agradecido por tomarse tanto interés —dijo Caspar Goodwood—, pero voy a ir a Roma y no le voy a hacer ningún daño a la señora Osmond.

—Puede que no le haga daño, pero ¿le será de ayuda a ella? Esa es la cuestión.

—¿Es que necesita ayuda? —preguntó él lentamente mientras la miraba de forma muy penetrante.

—La mayoría de las mujeres siempre la necesitan —contestó Henrietta de forma evasiva, con una generalización menos optimista de lo habitual—. Si va a Roma —añadió—, espero que sea un amigo de verdad… ¡no uno egoísta!

Dicho lo cual, se giró y comenzó a contemplar los cuadros. Caspar Goodwood la observó mientras se movía por la sala, pero al cabo de un momento se unió a ella.

—Usted ha oído algo sobre ella aquí —dijo—, y me gustaría saber qué es.

Henrietta tenía por principio no faltar nunca a la verdad, y, aunque en esa ocasión podría haber estado justificado, decidió tras meditarlo unos minutos que no iba a hacer ninguna excepción.

—Sí, algo he oído —contestó—, pero como no quiero que vaya a Roma no se lo voy a contar.

—Como quiera. Lo averiguaré por mí mismo —dijo Goodwood, tras lo que añadió, con una falta de coherencia impropia de él—: ¡Ha oído que es infeliz!

—¡Ah, no podrá averiguar eso! —exclamó Henrietta.

—Eso espero. ¿Cuándo se va usted?

—Mañana, en el tren de la tarde. ¿Y usted?

Goodwood se contuvo; no tenía el menor deseo de viajar a Roma en compañía de la señorita Stackpole. Su displicencia con respecto a esa posibilidad no era del mismo tipo que la de Gilbert Osmond, pero en esos momentos era igual de clara. Era más un tributo a las virtudes de la señorita Stackpole que una referencia a sus defectos. La consideraba muy notable y brillante y, en teoría, no tenía ninguna objeción a la clase a la que pertenecía. Le parecía que las damas corresponsales formaban parte del esquema normal de las cosas en un país progresista y, aunque nunca leía sus crónicas, suponía que de algún modo contribuían a la prosperidad social. Pero era esa misma posición prominente la que le hacía desear que la señorita Stackpole no diese tantas cosas por sentado. Esta daba por sentado que él siempre estaba dispuesto a hacer alguna alusión a la señora Osmond; lo había hecho cuando se habían encontrado en París, seis semanas después de que él llegase a Europa, y había repetido la misma suposición cada vez que se le había presentado la oportunidad. Él no tenía el menor deseo de hablar de la señora Osmond por la sencilla razón de que no estaba siempre pensando en ella, de eso estaba bien seguro. Era el hombre más reservado y menos locuaz que pudiera haber, y esa inquisitiva escritora estaba constantemente apuntando su linterna hacia la tranquila oscuridad de su alma. Quería que no se interesase tanto, y hasta llegó a desear, aunque resulte muy grosero por su parte, que lo dejase en paz. A pesar de eso, en estos momentos pensaba también en otras cosas que ponen claramente

de manifiesto lo muy diferente que era su mal humor del de Gilbert Osmond. Quería ir a Roma de inmediato, y le habría gustado hacerlo solo en el tren nocturno. Odiaba los vagones de tren europeos, en los que uno tenía que ir sentado durante horas sobre un estrecho banco, como atornillado rodilla con rodilla y nariz con nariz con algún desconocido al que terminabas enfrentándote con toda la vehemencia añadida por el hecho de querer llevar la ventanilla abierta; y, aunque fueran incluso peores de noche que de día, por lo menos de noche podías dormir y soñar con los amplios vagones estadounidenses. Pero no podía coger el tren nocturno cuando la señorita Stackpole iba a partir al día siguiente; eso le parecería un insulto a una mujer indefensa. No obstante, tampoco podía esperar a que ella se fuese, pues tendría que aguardar más de lo que podía resistir su paciencia. No podía partir al día siguiente. La señorita Stackpole lo alteraba, lo oprimía; la sola idea de pasar un día con ella en el vagón de un tren europeo sería una fuente de irritación suplementaria. Aun así, era una dama que viajaba sola, y él tenía la obligación de ponerse a su servicio. No había vuelta de hoja; era una necesidad inexcusable. Adoptó una expresión muy seria durante unos momentos, y luego, en un tono muy directo desprovisto por completo de cualquier asomo de galantería, declaró:

—Por supuesto, si parte usted mañana, la acompañaré por si puedo serle de ayuda.

—Bueno, señor Goodwood, no esperaba menos de usted —contestó Henrietta imperturbable.

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Ya he tenido motivos para afirmar que Isabel sabía cuánto disgustaba a su marido que Ralph prolongara su estancia en Roma. La dama tenía esto muy presente cuando fue al hotel de su primo al día siguiente de haber instado a lord Warburton a dar una prueba tangible de su sinceridad y en esos momentos, al igual que en otros, veía con bastante claridad las razones de la oposición de Osmond. Este no quería que ella tuviese libertad de pensamiento, y sabía muy bien que Ralph era un apóstol de la libertad. Era precisamente por eso por lo que era tan refrescante ir a verlo, se dijo Isabel. Como podrá observarse, ella estaba dispuesta a procurarse tal alivio pese a la aversión que provocaba en su marido, pero le gustaba pensar que lo hacía de forma discreta. Todavía no se había decidido a actuar abiertamente en contra de los deseos de quien había sido reconocido e inscrito como su amo y señor, por más que en ocasiones Isabel contemplara ese hecho con desconcertante incredulidad. No obstante, era algo que pesaba mucho en su ánimo; tenía siempre muy presente el decoro e inviolabilidad del vínculo matrimonial. La idea de transgredirlos la llenaba de vergüenza y de miedo, ya que al entregarse en matrimonio no había considerado esa contingencia, convencida como había estado de que las intenciones de su marido eran tan generosas como las suyas. Aun así, le parecía que cada vez estaba más cerca el día en que tendría que retractarse de eso que tan solemnemente había concedido. Sería un ceremonial abominable y monstruoso, por lo que, mientras llegaba, procuraba no pensar en ello. Osmond no iba a ayudarla dando el primer paso, sino que dejaría que esa carga recayese sobre ella hasta el final. Todavía no le había prohibido formalmente que fuera a visitar a Ralph, pero estaba segura de que, como este no se marchase pronto, tal prohibición no tardaría en llegar. Pero ¿cómo iba a marcharse el pobre Ralph? Las condiciones meteorológicas seguían haciéndolo del todo imposible. Isabel entendía perfectamente que su marido tuviese tantas ganas de que se fuese; para ser justos, sabía que no había razón alguna para que le gustase que ella estuviese con su primo. Ralph nunca decía nada contra él, pero aun así la protesta muda y amarga de Osmond tenía su fundamento. Si este se decidiera a intervenir directamente, si hiciese valer su autoridad, ella tendría que tomar una decisión, lo cual no sería nada fácil. Dicha perspectiva hacía que el corazón le latiera más deprisa y las mejillas le ardieran, como digo, de antemano, y hasta había momentos en que, para evitar una ruptura abierta, deseaba que Ralph se marchara pese al riesgo que eso suponía. Y no servía de nada que, cuando se descubría albergando tales ideas, se dijese que era una débil y una cobarde. No se trataba de que quisiese menos a Ralph, sino de que casi todo parecía preferible antes que repudiar el acto más serio, el único acto sagrado, de su vida. Eso hacía que todo el futuro le pareciese odioso. Romper con Osmond una vez significaría romper para siempre; reconocer abiertamente que tenían necesidades irreconciliables sería admitir que todo su intento había resultado fallido. Para ellos no habría condonación, ni compromiso, ni olvido fácil, ni reajuste formal. Solo habían perseguido una cosa, pero esta debía ser exquisita. Una vez perdida, ya no habría nada que pudiese servir en su lugar, ningún posible sustituto de dicho logro. De momento, Isabel continuaba yendo al Hôtel de Paris con la frecuencia que consideraba apropiada; una corrección mesurada formaba parte del canon del buen gusto, y no podría haber mejor prueba de que la moralidad era, por así decirlo, cuestión de valorar las cosas en su justa medida. La aplicación que hacía Isabel de tal mesura había sido especialmente libre ese día, ya que, al axioma general de que no podía dejar que Ralph muriese solo, había añadido el hecho de que tenía que pedirle algo muy importante. Se trataba de algo que atañía tanto a Osmond como a ella.

No tardó en sacar el tema del que quería hablar.

—Quiero que me contestes a una pregunta. Es sobre lord Warburton.

—Creo que sé de qué se trata —contestó Ralph desde su sillón, del que sus delgadas piernas salían más largas que nunca.

—Es muy posible que así sea, así que contéstame, por favor.

—Bueno, no estoy muy seguro de que pueda.

—Sois amigos íntimos —dijo Isabel—, y has tenido ocasión de observarlo con detenimiento.

—Cierto. Pero piensa cuánto habrá tenido que disimular…

—¿Y por qué habría de disimular? Eso no va con su forma de ser.

—Ya, pero no olvides que las circunstancias son muy particulares —alegó Ralph con aire de estar disfrutando

íntimamente.

—Sí, hasta cierto punto. Pero ¿está enamorado de verdad?

—Yo creo que mucho. Eso sí que se le nota.

—¡Ah! —dijo Isabel con cierta sequedad.

Ralph la miró como si su agradable diversión se hubiese transformado en perplejidad.

—Lo dices como si te decepcionara saberlo.

Isabel se levantó mientras se alisaba lentamente los guantes y los observaba con detenimiento.

—Bueno, al fin y al cabo no es asunto mío.

—Estás muy filosófica —dijo su primo, que añadió al momento—: ¿Me puedes explicar de qué estás hablando?

Isabel lo miró fijamente.

—Creía que lo sabías. Lord Warburton me dijo que no hay cosa que desee más en el mundo que casarse con Pansy. Ya te lo conté, sin conseguir que comentaras nada al respecto. Podrías arriesgarte a decir algo hoy. ¿Crees que de verdad está interesado en ella?

—¡Ah, no, en Pansy no! —afirmó Ralph muy convencido.

—Pero si acabas de decir que sí.

Ralph esperó un momento antes de contestar.

—Me refería a que está interesado en ti, señora Osmond.

Isabel negó con la cabeza con aire muy serio.

—Eso es un disparate y lo sabes.

—Claro que lo es. Pero el disparate es de Warburton, no mío.

—Eso sería muy fastidioso —dijo Isabel con lo que consideró gran sutileza por su parte.

—He de decirte —prosiguió Ralph— que a mí me lo ha negado.

—¡Solo faltaba que os dedicarais los dos a hablar del tema! ¿Y te ha dicho también que está enamorado de Pansy?

—Me ha hablado muy bien de ella, con mucha corrección. Y por supuesto me ha comunicado que piensa que haría un gran papel en Lockleigh.

—¿Lo piensa de verdad?

—¡A saber qué piensa Warburton de verdad! —dijo Ralph.

Isabel volvió a alisarse los guantes. Eran largos y holgados, así que podía dedicarles tiempo. No obstante, enseguida levantó la cabeza y exclamó de forma súbita y acalorada:

—¡No me estás ayudando, Ralph!

Era la primera vez que hacía alusión a que necesitase ayuda, y la intensidad de sus palabras sacudió a su primo. Este soltó un largo murmullo de alivio, de compasión, de ternura; le pareció que al fin habían superado el abismo que los separaba. Fue eso lo que le hizo exclamar al momento:

—¡Debes de ser muy desdichada!

En cuanto lo dijo, Isabel recobró el control de sí misma, que utilizó en primer lugar para fingir que no lo había oído.

—Cuando hablo de que me ayudes, estoy diciendo una sandez —le dijo con una rápida sonrisa—. ¡Cómo iba a molestarte con mis problemas domésticos! La cuestión es muy sencilla: lord Warburton tendrá que arreglárselas solo. Yo no puedo hacer nada por él.

—Debe de ser fácil para él conseguir lo que quiere —dijo Ralph.

Isabel meditó un instante.

—Ya… pero no siempre ha sido así.

—Cierto, pero ya sabes que eso siempre me ha sorprendido mucho. ¿Crees a la señorita Osmond capaz de darnos una sorpresa?

—Más bien creo que nos la daría él. Me parece que, al final, terminará por dejarlo estar.

—Él nunca haría nada deshonroso —afirmó Ralph.

—Estoy convencida de eso, y lo más honrado sería que dejase a la pobre niña en paz. Ella está interesada en otra persona, y sería una crueldad intentar sobornarla con magníficos ofrecimientos para que se olvide del otro.

—Quizá sería cruel para la otra persona… la que ella ama. Pero Warburton no tiene por qué tener eso en cuenta.

—No, sería cruel para ella —repuso Isabel—. Ella sería muy desdichada si dejase que la convencieran para que se olvidase del pobre señor Rosier. La idea parece hacerte gracia, pero, claro, no eres tú el que está enamorado de él.

Para Pansy, el señor Rosier tiene el mérito de estar enamorado de ella, mientras que ve claramente que lord Warburton no lo está.

—Pero se portaría muy bien con ella —dijo Ralph.

—Ya se ha portado muy bien con ella. Afortunadamente, aún no le ha dicho nada que la haya perturbado. Podría ir mañana y despedirse de ella con absoluta propiedad.

—¿Y crees que eso le gustaría a tu marido?

—En absoluto, y puede que tuviera razón en eso. Lo que pasa es que quiere enterarse de cuál es la situación.

—¿Y te ha encargado que te enteres tú? —se aventuró a preguntar Ralph.

—Bueno, como conozco a lord Warburton hace tiempo… es decir, más tiempo que Gilbert, es normal que me interese por sus intenciones.

—¿Quieres decir que te intereses en que renuncie a ellas?

Isabel vaciló un momento mientras fruncía ligeramente el ceño.

—A ver si te entiendo. ¿Estás defendiéndolo?

—Ni mucho menos. Me alegraría mucho que no llegase a convertirse en el marido de tu hijastra. ¡Eso te colocaría en una posición realmente extraña! —dijo Ralph sonriendo—. Pero me preocupa que tu marido piense que no has hecho bastante para alentar a Warburton.

Isabel se descubrió capaz de sonreír igual que él.

—Mi marido me conoce demasiado bien como para no esperar que le diese muchos ánimos. Y supongo que él mismo tampoco tiene mucha intención de hacerlo. ¡No me da miedo no poder justificarme! —dijo con cierta ligereza.

Por un instante a Isabel se le había caído la máscara, pero se la había vuelto a poner enseguida, para enorme decepción de Ralph. Durante unos segundos había vislumbrado su verdadera cara, y anhelaba intensamente poder contemplarla. Sentía el deseo casi salvaje de oírla quejarse de su marido, de oírla decir que este la haría responsable de la deserción de lord Warburton. Ralph estaba seguro de que ese era el dilema al que se enfrentaba Isabel, y sabía de forma instintiva y por adelantado la forma que adoptaría el disgusto de Osmond llegado el caso, que sería del tipo más rastrero y cruel. Habría querido advertir a Isabel de eso, para que al menos viera que se preocupaba por ella y que sabía lo que pasaba. Lo de menos era que Isabel lo supiera aún mejor; era más por su propia satisfacción que por la de ella por lo que ansiaba demostrarle que no se dejaba engañar. Intentaba una y otra vez que ella traicionara a Osmond, y se sentía despiadado, cruel y casi despreciable por hacerlo. Pero eso poco importaba, ya que siempre fracasaba en su intento. ¿A qué había ido ella entonces, y por qué casi parecía estar brindándole la oportunidad de quebrantar su compromiso tácito? ¿Para qué le pedía consejo si no le dejaba contestar libremente? ¿Cómo iban a hablar de sus problemas domésticos, como a ella les gustaba llamarlos con humor, si el principal factor no podía ser mencionado? Esas contradicciones eran de por sí indicativas de los problemas que tenía Isabel, cuyo grito de ayuda de hacía unos momentos era para Ralph lo más importante.

—Aun así, estaréis en claro desacuerdo —dijo al cabo de unos instantes y, como Isabel no respondió, mirándole como si apenas le entendiera, añadió—: Descubriréis que tenéis puntos de vista muy distintos al respecto.

—Eso es fácil que pase incluso entre las parejas más unidas —afirmó Isabel al tiempo que cogía su sombrilla. Ralph vio que estaba nerviosa, temerosa de lo que él pudiese decir—. No obstante, es difícil que lleguemos a discutir por eso —añadió—, ya que casi todo el interés en el asunto es por su parte. Es muy natural: al fin y al cabo, Pansy es hija suya… no mía.

Y le tendió la mano para despedirse. Ralph decidió mentalmente que Isabel no debía irse sin antes decirle que lo sabía todo. Era una oportunidad que no podía dejar escapar.

—¿Sabes qué le hará decir ese interés suyo? —le preguntó mientras le cogía la mano. Ella negó con la cabeza con cierta aspereza, aunque sin intención disuasoria, así que Ralph continuó—: Le hará decir que no has puesto mucho de tu parte porque estás celosa.

Se detuvo un momento, asustado ante la expresión de Isabel.

—¿Celosa?

—Sí, de su hija.

Isabel se sonrojó y echó la cabeza hacia atrás.

—No estás siendo muy amable —dijo con una voz que Ralph nunca le había oído.

—Sé sincera conmigo y verás si lo soy —contestó.

Pero Isabel no dijo nada; se limitó a retirar la mano, que Ralph todavía le sujetaba, y abandonó rápidamente de la

habitación. Decidió que tenía que hablar con Pansy y se dispuso a hacerlo ese mismo día, por lo que fue a la habitación de la joven antes de la cena. Pansy ya estaba vestida; siempre hacía las cosas con mucho tiempo, lo cual parecía demostrar su dulce paciencia y la gracilidad y discreción con la que podía sentarse a esperar. En esos momentos estaba, con todas sus galas ya puestas, en una butaca delante del fuego. Había apagado las velas al terminar de arreglarse, de acuerdo con las frugales costumbres con las que había sido educada y que ahora observaba más que nunca, de manera que la estancia solo estaba iluminada por un par de leños ardiendo. Las habitaciones del palazzo Roccanera eran tan amplias como numerosas, y la virginal alcoba de Pansy era una inmensa cámara de oscuros techos de madera. En medio de aquella inmensidad, su diminuta ocupante parecía una simple mota de humanidad, y, cuando se levantó con rápida deferencia para recibir a Isabel, a esta la impresionó más que nunca su tímida sinceridad. Tenía una tarea difícil ante sí, así que lo mejor sería acometerla de la forma más sencilla posible. Sentía amargura y enojo, pero se advirtió que no debía dar muestras de tal acaloramiento. Hasta le daba miedo resultar demasiado severa, o al menos demasiado seria; en definitiva, le daba miedo asustar a Pansy. Pero esta parecía haber adivinado que Isabel estaba allí más o menos en calidad de confesor, pues, después de acercar un poco más al fuego la butaca en que había estado sentada para que Isabel la ocupara, la joven se arrodilló sobre un cojín delante de ella, levantó la cabeza y puso sus manos entrelazadas en las rodillas de su madrastra. Lo que quería Isabel era oír de sus labios que no le interesaba lord Warburton, pero, por mucho que desease obtener esa garantía, no se sentía en modo alguno libre para provocarla. El padre de la joven lo calificaría de flagrante traición, pero aun así Isabel era consciente de que, si Pansy mostrara el menor indicio de estar dispuesta a alentar las aspiraciones de lord Warburton, su obligación sería hacer que se contuviese. Era difícil interrogar sin que lo pareciera, y la suprema simplicidad de Pansy, de una inocencia aún mayor de lo que Isabel hubiese llegado a creer, daba a cualquier intento de pesquisa, por tentativa que fuese, algo del carácter de una admonición. Mientras estaba allí arrodillada al vago resplandor del fuego, con su bonito vestido reluciendo débilmente, las manos juntas a medio camino entre el ruego y la sumisión, y sus dulces ojos fijos en ella y embebidos de la seriedad de la situación, le pareció a Isabel una mártir infantil que hubiese sido engalanada para un sacrificio sin que ni siquiera concibiera la idea de intentar evitarlo. Cuando Isabel le dijo que nunca le había hablado de lo que pensaba con respecto a la posibilidad de que se casase, pero que su silencio no se había debido a la indiferencia o a la ignorancia, sino que estaba motivado por el deseo de dejarle plena libertad, Pansy se inclinó hacia delante, alzó más el rostro y, con un pequeño murmullo que sin duda expresaba un profundo anhelo, respondió que hacía tiempo que ansiaba que le hablase de eso, por lo que le rogaba que la aconsejase.

—Me resulta muy difícil darte ningún consejo al respecto —contestó Isabel—. No sé cómo hacerlo. Eso es asunto de tu padre, así que deberías pedirle consejo a él y, sobre todo, actuar de acuerdo con el mismo.

Pansy bajó la mirada al escuchar eso, y durante unos segundos no dijo nada. Luego comentó:

—Creo que prefiero su consejo al de papá.

—Pues no debería ser así —replicó Isabel con frialdad—. Yo te quiero mucho, pero tu padre te quiere aún más.

—No es porque usted me quiera… sino porque es una dama —respondió Pansy con aire de estar diciendo algo muy razonable—. Una dama puede aconsejar a una joven mejor que un hombre.

—En ese caso, te aconsejo que aceptes con el mayor respeto los deseos de tu padre.

—Sí —asintió la joven muy convencida—, eso es lo que he de hacer.

—Pero si te hablo ahora sobre tu matrimonio no es por tu bien, sino por el mío —continuó Isabel—. Quiero saber lo que esperas, lo que deseas, para que yo pueda actuar en consecuencia.

Pansy la miró fijamente, y luego se apresuró a preguntar:

—¿Hará usted todo lo que yo quiera?

—Antes de decir que sí, tengo que saber qué es lo que quieres.

Entonces Pansy le explicó que lo único que quería en la vida era casarse con el señor Rosier. Este se lo había pedido, y ella le había contestado que lo haría si su padre le daba su consentimiento, pero su padre nunca lo permitiría.

—Bien, en ese caso es imposible —afirmó Isabel.

—Sí, es imposible —repitió Pansy con un suspiro, y con la misma expresión de intensa atención en su delicada carita.

—Entonces debes pensar en alguna otra opción —prosiguió Isabel, pero Pansy, con otro suspiro, le dijo que ya lo había intentado sin éxito alguno.

—Solo pensamos en los que piensan en nosotros —alegó con una débil sonrisa—, y sé que el señor Rosier piensa en mí.

—Pues no debería —dijo Isabel con altivez—. Tu padre le ha pedido expresamente que no lo haga.

—No lo puede evitar, porque sabe que yo también pienso en él.

—No deberías hacerlo. Puede que él tenga alguna excusa, pero tú no.

—Ojalá encontrase usted alguna —exclamó la joven como si estuviese rogando a la Virgen.

—Ni se me ocurriría intentarlo —replicó la Virgen con una frigidez inusual—. Si supieses que otra persona también pensaba en ti, ¿pensarías en él?

—Nadie puede pensar en mí del modo en que lo hace el señor Rosier. Nadie tiene tanto derecho como él.

—¡Ah! Es que yo no le admito tal derecho al señor Rosier —exclamó Isabel de forma hipócrita.

Pansy se limitó a mirarla fijamente con evidente desconcierto, e Isabel aprovechó la ocasión para explicarle las terribles consecuencias que acarrearía desobedecer a su padre. Entonces Pansy la interrumpió, asegurándole que jamás le desobedecería ni se casaría sin su consentimiento. Y anunció, en el tono más sereno y sencillo posible, que, aunque no llegase a casarse con el señor Rosier, nunca dejaría de pensar en él. Parecía haber aceptado la idea de su eterna soltería, pero por supuesto Isabel era libre de pensar que Pansy no tenía la menor idea de lo que eso significaba. La joven era totalmente sincera, y estaba dispuesta a renunciar a su enamorado. Eso podría parecer un paso importante para comprometerse con otro, pero estaba claro que para Pansy las cosas no iban en esa dirección. No sentía resentimiento alguno contra su padre, ya que su corazón no conocía el resentimiento; tan solo una dulce fidelidad a Edward Rosier, así como la extraña y exquisita intuición de que la demostraría aún mejor permaneciendo soltera que casándose con él.

—Tu padre quiere que hagas un matrimonio mejor —dijo Isabel—. La fortuna del señor Rosier no es muy grande.

—¿Qué quiere decir mejor… si ese ya sería lo bastante bueno para mí? Y yo que tengo tan poco dinero, ¿para qué quiero una fortuna?

—El que tengas poco es precisamente la razón para que intentes tener más.

Y mientras decía eso, Isabel se alegró de que la habitación estuviese tan poco iluminada, ya que sintió que la expresión de su rostro debía de resultar de una falsedad repugnante. Ese era el tipo de cosas que le tocaba hacer por Osmond. Los solemnes ojos de Pansy, fijos en los suyos, casi la turbaban; se sentía avergonzada por tener que tomarse con tal ligereza las preferencias sentimentales de la joven.

—¿Qué quiere usted que haga? —le preguntó esta en voz baja.

Era una pregunta terrible, e Isabel se refugió en timoratas vaguedades.

—Que recuerdes lo feliz que puedes hacer a tu padre.

—¿Si me caso con quien él quiera?

Durante un momento la respuesta de Isabel se hizo esperar, tras lo que ella misma se oyó pronunciarla en medio del silencio que la intensa atención de Pansy parecía crear:

—Sí, si te casas con quien él quiera.

La mirada de la joven se volvió más penetrante, y dio a Isabel la impresión de que dudaba de su sinceridad, lo cual cobró más fuerza cuando Pansy se levantó lentamente del cojín. Permaneció un momento inmóvil con sus pequeñas manos ya separadas, y a continuación dijo con voz temblorosa:

—Bien, pues espero que nadie me lo pida.

—Es que de eso se trata. Puede que haya otra persona dispuesta a hacerlo.

—No creo que esté dispuesto de verdad —dijo Pansy.

—Pues eso parece, y si no lo ha hecho ya es porque no está seguro de ser aceptado.

—¿No está seguro? Entonces es que no está dispuesto de verdad.

Isabel consideró que se trataba de una reflexión bastante aguda. Se levantó también y permaneció un momento contemplando el fuego.

—Lord Warburton te ha dedicado muchas atenciones —prosiguió al poco—. Imagino que sabes que estaba hablando de él.

En contra de lo esperado, Isabel se encontraba casi en la tesitura de tener que justificarse, lo cual la obligó a introducir al aristócrata en la conversación con más brusquedad de la que había pretendido.

—Lord Warburton ha sido muy amable conmigo y le aprecio mucho. Pero si lo que me está diciendo es que se me va a declarar, creo que está equivocada.

—Sí, puede que me equivoque, pero sería algo que agradaría a tu padre enormemente.

Pansy negó con la cabeza con una leve y juiciosa sonrisa.

—Lord Warburton no se me va a declarar para complacer a papá.

—Tu padre quiere que lo alientes a ello —continuó Isabel de forma mecánica.

—¿Y cómo puedo alentarlo?

—No lo sé. Eso te lo debe decir tu padre.

Pansy no dijo nada durante unos instantes; se limitó a seguir sonriendo como si estuviera en posesión de una luminosa certeza.

—¡No hay peligro… ningún peligro! —exclamó al fin.

Lo dijo con tal convicción, y con tanta felicidad al creerlo, que hizo que Isabel se sintiera violenta. Era como si la estuviese acusando de falta de honradez, lo cual era una idea muy desagradable. Para intentar recuperar su autoestima estuvo a punto de decir que el mismo lord Warburton le había hecho saber que sí había peligro. Pero no lo hizo; tan solo dijo, a causa del azoramiento, que sin duda aquel había sido muy amable y atento con Pansy.

—Sí, es muy amable —contestó Pansy—, y por eso lo aprecio.

—Entonces, ¿dónde está el problema?

—Siempre he estado segura de que él sabe que no quiero… ¿qué es lo que ha dicho que debería hacer…?, alentarlo. Sabe que no quiero casarme con él, así que quiere que yo sepa que no me va a molestar, y de ahí su amabilidad. Es como si dijera: «La admiro mucho, pero si no le gusta, no se lo volveré a decir». Me parece que es muy noble y amable de su parte —continuó Pansy de forma cada vez más categórica—. Eso es todo lo que nos hemos dicho. Y tampoco está interesado en mí. Ah, no, no hay ningún peligro.

Isabel quedó muy sorprendida de la profunda perspicacia de la que aquella sumisa jovencita estaba demostrando ser capaz, y le dio miedo esa sabiduría de Pansy, hasta el punto de casi comenzar a amilanarse ante ella.

—Debes contarle eso a tu padre —dijo con reservas.

—Creo que prefiero no hacerlo —contestó Pansy sin reserva alguna.

—No deberías dejar que albergue falsas esperanzas.

—Puede que no, pero a mí me conviene que sí las tenga. Mientras papá crea que lord Warburton tiene intención de hacer algo de eso que dice usted, no me propondrá ningún otro pretendiente. Y eso es una ventaja para mí —afirmó la joven con gran lucidez.

Había algo muy brillante en esa lucidez suya que hizo que su interlocutora respirara profundamente, pues la estaba librando de una grave responsabilidad. Pansy tenía suficientes luces, mientras que Isabel sentía en esos momentos que no podía desprenderse de las pocas que le quedaban. Aun así, seguía aferrándose a la idea de que tenía que ser leal a Osmond, de que tenía la obligación moral de tratar con la hija de este como correspondía. Bajo la influencia de esa sensación, le hizo otro comentario antes de retirarse: una sugerencia con la que consideró que ya había hecho cuanto estaba en su mano.

—Tu padre da por sentado que, al menos, te gustaría casarte con un noble.

Pansy estaba ante el umbral abierto, tras haber apartado la cortina para que pasara Isabel.

—Para mí el señor Rosier tiene todo el aspecto de un noble —afirmó muy seria.

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Lord Warburton estuvo varios días sin aparecer por el salón de la señora Osmond, y esta no pudo dejar de observar que su marido no le comentaba que hubiese recibido una carta suya. También observó que Osmond se hallaba expectante y que, aunque no le gustaba nada que se le notara, consideraba que su distinguido amigo lo estaba haciendo esperar demasiado. Al cabo de cuatro días hizo mención a su ausencia.

—¿Qué ha sido de Warburton? ¿Por qué se comporta como si uno fuera un comerciante que le lleva una factura?

—No sé nada de él —contestó Isabel—. Lo vi el viernes pasado en el baile alemán, y me dijo entonces que tenía intención de escribirte.

—Pues no me ha escrito.

—Eso me figuraba, ya que no me decías nada.

—Es un tipo muy raro —sentenció Osmond, el cual, al ver que Isabel no replicaba nada, pasó a inquirir si era normal que su señoría tardase cinco días en redactar una carta—: ¿Es que le cuesta tanto juntar palabras?

—No lo sé —se vio obligada a responder Isabel—. Nunca he recibido una carta suya.

—¿Que nunca has recibido una carta de él? Pues tenía entendido que en cierto momento mantuvisteis una correspondencia muy íntima.

Isabel contestó que no había sido así y dejó estar el tema. Sin embargo, al día siguiente, cuando su marido entró en el salón ya avanzada la tarde, este volvió a sacarlo.

—Cuando lord Warburton te habló de su intención de escribirme, ¿qué le dijiste tú? —preguntó.

Isabel titubeó un instante.

—Creo que le dije que no se olvidara de hacerlo.

—¿Pensabas que existía ese riesgo?

—Como tú mismo dices, es un tipo raro.

—Pues parece que se le ha olvidado —dijo Osmond—. Ten la amabilidad de recordárselo.

—¿Quieres que le escriba? —preguntó Isabel.

—No veo inconveniente.

—Esperas demasiado de mí.

—Ah, sí, espero mucho de ti.

—Me temo que voy a decepcionarte —dijo Isabel.

—Mis expectativas han conseguido sobrevivir a innumerables decepciones.

—Ya lo sé. Piensa en la gran decepción que me he causado a mí misma. Si de verdad quieres echar el lazo a lord Warburton, deberías hacerlo tú mismo.

Osmond no respondió nada durante un par de minutos. Luego dijo:

—No resultará fácil, teniéndote a ti en mi contra.

Isabel dio un respingo y notó que comenzaba a temblar. Osmond tenía una forma de mirarla a través de sus ojos entrecerrados, como si estuviese pensando en ella pero sin apenas verla, que a Isabel le pareció que albergaba intenciones terriblemente crueles. Era como si la reconociera como algo desagradable de lo que necesitaba ocuparse, pero a la vez pudiera ignorarla como presencia real. Era un efecto que Isabel nunca había notado con tanta intensidad como en esos momentos.

—Creo que me estás acusando de algo muy rastrero —replicó.

—Te estoy acusando de no ser de fiar. Si al final él no se decide, será porque tú lo has impedido. No estoy seguro de que sea algo rastrero: es el tipo de cosas que las mujeres siempre piensan que pueden hacer. No me cabe duda de que tú debes de tener ideas muy buenas al respecto.

—Te dije que haría cuanto pudiera —continuó Isabel.

—Sí, para ganar tiempo.

Después de que él dijera eso, Isabel se sorprendió de que alguna vez ese hombre le hubiese podido parecer hermoso.

—¡Qué ganas debes de tener de atraparlo! —dijo ella al momento.

En cuanto habló, se dio cuenta del alcance de sus palabras, del que no había sido consciente en el momento de decirlas. Establecían una comparación entre Osmond y ella misma, recordando el hecho de que en una ocasión ella había tenido ese codiciado tesoro en la mano y se había sentido tan rica que lo había dejado caer. Un júbilo momentáneo se apoderó de ella, un deleite terrible por haberlo herido, pues la expresión de Osmond le dijo al instante que las implicaciones de su exclamación no habían caído en saco roto. No obstante, él no manifestó nada en ese sentido; se limitó a replicar rápidamente:

—Sí, unas ganas inmensas.

En ese momento apareció un sirviente para anunciar una visita, y tras él entró el propio lord Warburton, el cual se refrenó de forma visible al encontrar allí a Osmond. Su mirada pasaba con celeridad del señor a la señora de la casa, un movimiento que parecía denotar su miedo a haber interrumpido algo, o incluso la percepción de que la situación no presagiaba nada bueno. Entonces avanzó con su característico porte inglés, en el que una ligera timidez parecía ofrecerse como un elemento de buena educación, y cuyo único defecto era la dificultad para realizar bien las transiciones. Osmond estaba desconcertado y no sabía qué decir, pero Isabel se apresuró a comentar que justo en esos momentos estaban hablando de él. Entonces su marido añadió que hacía tiempo que no sabían de él, y que temían que se hubiese marchado.

—No —dijo lord Warburton mientras miraba y sonreía a Osmond—, pero me dispongo a hacerlo muy pronto. —A continuación, les explicó que había recibido aviso de regresar a Inglaterra cuanto antes, y que partiría al día siguiente o al otro—. Lo que más lamento es tener que dejar aquí al pobre Touchett —terminó diciendo.

Durante unos instantes ninguno de sus dos interlocutores dijo nada. Osmond tan solo se reclinó en la butaca mientras lo escuchaba. Isabel no miró a su marido, de manera que solo podía imaginarse su expresión. Ella tenía los ojos fijos en el rostro de su visitante, donde hallaban plena libertad para reposar, ya que su señoría los evitaba con mucho cuidado. Sin embargo, Isabel estaba segura de que, de haberse encontrado sus miradas, la de él le habría resultado muy expresiva.

—Sería mejor que se llevase al pobre Touchett con usted —oyó decir a su marido con bastante ligereza al cabo de un momento.

—Lo mejor para Touchett es esperar a que haga mejor tiempo —contestó lord Warburton—. Yo no le aconsejaría que viajase ahora.

Se quedó un cuarto de hora, durante el cual habló como si no fueran a verse durante una buena temporada… a menos, claro está, que fuesen ellos a Inglaterra, lo cual les recomendó encarecidamente que hicieran. Le pareció una gran idea que ambos fuesen en otoño y pasasen un mes con él, en el que haría todo lo que estuviese en su mano para agasajarlos. Como había reconocido el propio Osmond, este solo había estado una vez en Inglaterra, lo cual era absurdo tratándose de un hombre con su estilo de vida e inteligencia. Inglaterra era justo el país para él, y lord Warburton estaba seguro de que lo pasaría muy bien. Entonces le preguntó a Isabel si recordaba lo bien que se lo había pasado allí y si no le apetecía repetir. Seguro que quería ver Gardencourt de nuevo. Era un lugar excepcional. Touchett no lo cuidaba como era debido, pero era uno de esos lugares que no se echan a perder aunque los descuides. ¿Por qué no iban a hacer una visita a Touchett? Seguro que los había invitado. ¿No lo había hecho? ¡Qué descortés de su parte! Y lord Warburton prometió cantarle las cuarenta al señor de Gardencourt. Claro que tenía que tratarse de un mero despiste, porque seguro que Touchett estaría encantado de tenerlos con él. Lo pasarían fenomenal, un mes con Touchett y otro con él, además de visitar a todas las demás personas que debían de conocer allí. Lord Warburton añadió que también sería muy agradable para la señorita Osmond, quien le había dicho que nunca había estado en Inglaterra, y a la que había asegurado que era un país que valía la pena conocer. Por supuesto, a ella no le hacía falta ir a Inglaterra para que la admirasen, ya que ese era su sino allá donde fuese, pero sin duda triunfaría inmensamente allí, si eso servía de aliciente. Entonces preguntó si estaba en casa, para despedirse de ella. No es que le gustaran las despedidas, a las que tenía verdadero pavor. La última vez se había ido de Inglaterra sin despedirse de nadie en absoluto. Hasta le daban ganas de irse de Roma sin molestar a la señorita Osmond. No había nada más deprimente que ver a alguien para decirle adiós. Uno nunca decía lo que quería decir, y solo lo recordaba al cabo de una hora. Por otro lado, también se solían decir muchas cosas que no deberían decirse, simplemente porque había que decir algo. Era una sensación molesta, que volvía a uno más torpe de lo habitual. Era lo que le pasaba en esos momentos, así que, en el caso de que la señora Osmond considerara que no estaba hablando como debería, había que achacárselo a la agitación que sentía, ya que no era fácil despedirse de ella. Lamentaba mucho tener que irse. Había

pensado en escribirle en vez de pasarse por allí, pero de todas formas le escribiría para decirle todas las cosas que seguro que se le ocurrirían en cuanto se marchase. En cualquier caso debían considerar seriamente la posibilidad de ir a Lockleigh.

Si había algo extraño en su visita o en el anuncio de su partida, no llegó a salir a la superficie. Lord Warburton habló de la agitación que sentía, pero no la demostró de ningún otro modo, e Isabel comprendió que, una vez que había decidido retirarse, era capaz de llevarlo a cabo con gallardía. Se alegraba mucho por él, pues lo apreciaba lo bastante como para desear que consiguiese salir airoso de cualquier situación. Siempre lo hacía, no por una cuestión de insolencia, sino sencillamente porque estaba acostumbrado a salir bien parado, e Isabel sabía que ni su marido podría en esos momentos frustrar dicha facultad. Mientras estaba allí sentada, una compleja operación estaba teniendo lugar en su mente. Por un lado escuchaba a su visitante, respondía como convenía, leía más o menos entre líneas lo que él quería decir, y se preguntaba qué le habría dicho si la hubiese encontrado sola; por otro, era perfectamente consciente de cuáles debían de ser las emociones de Osmond en esos momentos, y casi sentía lástima por él, condenado como estaba a sufrir el intenso dolor de la pérdida sin poder recurrir al alivio de la maldición. Había albergado grandes esperanzas y ahora, mientras contemplaba como estas se desvanecían, se veía obligado a estar allí sentado, sonriendo, mientras hacía girar los pulgares. Tampoco es que se esforzara mucho por sonreír; en general, se limitaba a ofrecer a su común amigo una expresión ausente que a un hombre tan inteligente como él no le costaba nada adoptar. De hecho, parte de la inteligencia de Osmond estribaba en poder aparentar con maestría que las cosas no le afectaban. No obstante, su aspecto en esos momentos no era ninguna confesión de que se sintiese decepcionado, sino que simplemente formaba parte del método habitual de Osmond, consistente en que, cuanto más le interesaba algo, menos expresivo parecía. Había estado muy interesado en conseguir ese botín desde el principio, pero nunca había dejado que su ansiedad se reflejase en su refinado rostro. Había tratado a su posible yerno como trataba a todo el mundo: con aire de interesarse solo por el bienestar del otro, y no porque pudiese suponer ningún beneficio para una persona tan bien provista en todos los sentidos como era Gilbert Osmond. En esos momentos no iba a dar ninguna muestra, ni la más leve ni la más sutil, de que en su interior estuviese enfurecido porque se le estaba escapando la perspectiva de un gran beneficio. Isabel podía estar bien segura de eso, le proporcionase o no alguna satisfacción. Y, por muy extraño que resultase, se la proporcionaba. Quería que lord Warburton triunfase ante su marido, pero a la vez quería que este fuese muy superior a aquel. A su modo, Osmond era una persona admirable que, al igual que su visitante, contaba con la ventaja de poder hacer uso de un hábito adquirido. En ese caso no se trataba del de salir airoso, sino de otro casi tan bueno: el de no esforzarse por nada. Mientras estaba reclinado en el sillón, escuchando vagamente las amables invitaciones y las contenidas explicaciones del otro, como si lo más correcto fuese asumir que iban dirigidas fundamentalmente a su esposa, a Osmond le quedaba al menos (ya que poco más le quedaba) el consuelo de saber lo bien que se había mantenido al margen de todo, y que ese aire de indiferencia que era capaz de lucir en esos momentos tenía la belleza añadida de la coherencia. Había un gran mérito en conseguir que pareciese que los movimientos de lord Warburton no tenían nada que ver con él. Sin duda este lo estaba haciendo bien, pero la actuación de Osmond era, por su propia esencia, mucho más conseguida. Al fin y al cabo, lord Warburton no se encontraba en una posición difícil, ya que no había ninguna razón por la que no pudiese marcharse de Roma si quería. Había sentido ciertas inclinaciones bienintencionadas que no habían dado fruto, pero, como no había llegado a comprometerse, su honor quedaba a salvo. Osmond solo pareció prestar un moderado interés a la propuesta de que fuesen a pasar una temporada con él, y a la alusión al éxito que Pansy podría alcanzar durante su visita. Tan solo murmuró unas palabras de agradecimiento, y dejó que fuera Isabel quien dijese que se trataba de algo que tenían que meditar con calma. Pero, incluso mientras hacía esta observación, podía ver ya la gran panorámica que de pronto se había abierto en la mente de su marido, en cuyo centro desfilaba con paso firme la pequeña figura de Pansy.

Lord Warburton había solicitado permiso para despedirse de Pansy, pero ni Isabel ni Osmond hicieron ademán de llamarla. El noble parecía querer dejar claro que su visita sería corta. Estaba sentado en una silla, como si fuera a quedarse poco rato, y con el sombrero en la mano. Sin embargo no se iba, e Isabel se preguntó a qué estaba esperando para hacerlo. No creyó que fuese por ver a Pansy, ya que le daba la impresión de que prefería no verla. Tenía que ser para quedarse con ella a solas, porque tenía algo que decirle. A Isabel no le apetecía mucho oírlo, ya que temía que se tratase de una explicación, y en esos momentos podía prescindir perfectamente de ellas. Sin embargo, Osmond acabó por levantarse, como un hombre de buen gusto al que se le hubiera ocurrido que tal vez un visitante tan asiduo quisiera dedicar sus últimas palabras de despedida a las damas.

—Tengo que escribir una carta antes de la cena —dijo—, así que le ruego que me disculpe. Voy a ver si mi hija no está ocupada, y si es así le comunicaré que está usted aquí. Por supuesto, cuando vuelva a Roma no deje de venir a vernos. La señora Osmond le tendrá al tanto sobre nuestro posible viaje a Inglaterra, ya que es ella la que decide todas esas cosas.

La inclinación de cabeza con que, en lugar de un apretón de manos, terminó ese breve parlamento, fue quizá una forma de saludo un tanto exigua, pero en conjunto era lo único que la ocasión requería. Isabel consideró que, una vez que Osmond saliera de la habitación, lord Warburton no tendría excusa para decir: «Su marido está muy enfadado», lo cual le resultaría muy desagradable. No obstante, si lo dijese, ella contestaría: «Oh, no se preocupe. No es a usted a quien odia, sino a mí».

Fue entonces, tras quedarse los dos solos, cuando su amigo dio leves muestras de sentir cierta incomodidad, mientras se sentaba en otra silla y se dedicaba a coger y observar dos o tres de los objetos que tenía más cerca.

—Espero que haga venir a la señorita Osmond —comentó al poco—. Tengo muchas ganas de verla.

—Me alegro de que vaya a ser la última vez —dijo Isabel.

—Yo también. No está interesada en mí.

—No, no está interesada en usted.

—No me extraña —repuso. Luego añadió en tono intrascendente—: Entonces, ¿vendrán a Inglaterra?

—Creo que será mejor no ir.

—Pero usted me debe una visita. ¿No se acuerda que tenía que haber ido a Lockleigh en una ocasión, pero al final no fue?

—Todo ha cambiado desde entonces —afirmó Isabel.

—Pero no a peor… al menos, en lo que a nosotros respecta. Verla a usted bajo mi techo —dijo con una exaltación momentánea— me produciría una gran satisfacción.

Isabel había temido las explicaciones, pero esa fue la única que hubo. Hablaron un poco de Ralph y, al cabo un momento, entró Pansy, que ya estaba vestida para la cena y lucía un pequeño rubor en cada mejilla. Le tendió la mano a lord Warburton y se quedó mirándolo con una sonrisa fija: una sonrisa que Isabel sabía, aunque seguramente su señoría nunca llegaría a sospecharlo, que recordaba mucho a la expresión de romper a llorar.

—Me marcho —le dijo él—, y quería despedirme de usted.

—Adiós, lord Warburton —contestó Pansy con un perceptible temblor de voz.

—Y también quería decirle lo mucho que deseo que sea usted muy feliz.

—Gracias, lord Warburton —respondió Pansy.

Él permaneció un momento en silencio y miró a Isabel.

—No me cabe duda de que será feliz… tiene usted un ángel de la guarda.

—Estoy segura de que lo seré —dijo Pansy en el tono de alguien cuyas certezas son siempre alegres.

—Con esa convicción llegará usted muy lejos. Pero si alguna vez le fallase, recuerde… recuerde… —dijo su interlocutor balbuceando un poco, y luego añadió con una leve risa—: ¡Bueno, piense en mí de vez en cuando!

Luego estrechó la mano de Isabel en silencio y se marchó.

Isabel esperaba una efusión de lágrimas de su hijastra después de que lord Warburton se fuese, pero en realidad Pansy la obsequió con algo muy diferente.

—Creo que sí que es usted mi ángel de la guarda —exclamó con mucha dulzura.

Isabel negó con la cabeza.

—No soy un ángel de ningún tipo. Como mucho, una buena amiga.

—En ese caso es muy buena amiga, por haberle pedido a papá que me tratase bien.

—No le he pedido nada a tu padre —contestó Isabel extrañada.

—Me ha dicho que viniese al salón, y después me ha dado un beso muy cariñoso.

—Ah, bueno —dijo Isabel—, pero eso ha sido cosa de él.

Reconoció la estrategia de inmediato; era muy propia de Osmond, y aún habría de verla en otras muchas ocasiones. Ni siquiera con Pansy podía ponerse en evidencia ni por un momento. Ese día cenaron fuera y luego asistieron a otra recepción, de manera que Isabel no se quedó a solas con Osmond hasta bien entrada la noche. Cuando Pansy le dio un beso antes de irse a la cama, él le devolvió el abrazo con mayor munificencia de la habitual, haciendo que Isabel se preguntara si sería una indicación de que consideraba que su hija había salido perjudicada por las maquinaciones de su madrastra. De cualquier forma, solo era una expresión parcial de lo que continuaba esperando de su esposa.

Esta se disponía a seguir a Pansy cuando él le pidió que se quedara, ya que tenía algo que decirle. A continuación, dio unos pasos arriba y abajo por el salón mientras ella esperaba de pie con el manto aún puesto.

—No entiendo qué es lo que quieres —dijo Osmond al cabo de un momento—. Me gustaría saberlo, para saber cómo he de actuar.

—Ahora mismo lo único que quiero es irme a la cama. Estoy muy cansada.

—Siéntate y descansa. No te voy a entretener mucho rato. Ahí no… ponte cómoda.

Y Osmond arregló un montón de cojines que estaban esparcidos en pintoresco desorden sobre un enorme diván. No obstante, Isabel no se sentó ahí, sino que se dejó caer en la silla que tenía más cerca. El fuego se había apagado, y había poca luz en la enorme estancia. Isabel se arrebujó en su manto, pues tenía mucho frío.

—Creo que intentas humillarme —prosiguió Osmond—, lo cual es una empresa absurda.

—No tengo la menor idea de a qué te refieres —replicó ella.

—Has jugado a un juego muy complicado, y lo has resuelto muy bien.

—¿Qué es lo que he resuelto?

—Sin embargo, no creas que lo has dejado zanjado. Volveremos a verlo.

Y Osmond se detuvo delante de ella con las manos en los bolsillos y la miró pensativo de acuerdo con su estilo habitual, que parecía concebido para que Isabel supiera que no la consideraba un tema de reflexión apropiado, sino tan solo un incidente bastante desagradable.

—Si lo que estás diciendo es que lord Warburton se siente en la obligación de volver, te equivocas —dijo Isabel—. Nada le obliga.

—De eso es precisamente de lo que me quejo. Cuando digo que volverá, no me refiero a que lo vaya a hacer porque considere que es su deber.

—Pues entonces no tiene ninguna otra razón para volver. Creo que Roma ya está agotada para él.

—No, ese es un juicio muy banal. Roma es inagotable. —Y Osmond se puso de nuevo a andar de un lado a otro—. Aun así, tampoco corre mucha prisa —añadió—. Ha sido una buena idea por su parte eso de que vayamos a Inglaterra. Si no fuera por el miedo a encontrarme allí con tu primo, creo que hasta intentaría convencerte.

—Puede que no te encuentres allí con mi primo —dijo Isabel.

—Pero me gustaría estar seguro. No obstante, ya me encargaré de asegurarme en lo posible. Por otro lado, me gustaría ver su casa, de la que tanto me hablaste en su momento. ¿Cómo se llama…? Ah, sí, Gardencourt. Tiene que ser un lugar encantador. Y además está la devoción que siento por la memoria de tu tío, al que me hiciste coger mucha simpatía. Me gustaría ver el lugar en que vivió y murió. Sería sin duda todo un detalle. Y tu amigo tiene razón. Pansy debería conocer Inglaterra.

—Estoy segura de que le encantaría —dijo Isabel.

—Pero aún falta mucho para eso. El próximo otoño todavía está muy lejos —prosiguió Osmond—, y mientras hay otras cosas que nos interesan más. ¿Me crees tan orgulloso? —preguntó de repente.

—Creo que eres muy extraño.

—No me entiendes.

—No, ni siquiera cuando me insultas.

—Yo no te insulto. Eso es algo de lo que sería incapaz. Solo estoy hablando de ciertos hechos y, si la alusión te hiere, no es culpa mía. Es un hecho irrefutable que has manejado todo este asunto a tu antojo.

—¿Estás volviendo otra vez a lord Warburton? —preguntó Isabel—. Ya estoy harta de ese nombre.

—Pues volverás a oírlo antes de que acabemos.

Isabel había dicho que Osmond la insultaba, pero de pronto se dio cuenta de que eso ya no le dolía. Él estaba cayendo, cayendo cada vez más, y la visión de dicha caída hacía que Isabel casi se sintiera aturdida. Eso era lo único que le dolía. Lo veía tan extraño, tan diferente, tan alejado de ella. Aun así, la morbosa mente de Osmond seguía funcionando de forma extraordinaria, e Isabel sentía cada vez más curiosidad por saber de qué modo se creía justificado para hacer lo que estaba haciendo.

—Podría decirte que no creo que tengas nada que decirme que valga la pena oír —replicó ella al cabo de un momento—, pero puede que me equivoque. Aunque sí que hay algo que valdría la pena oír, y es saber con claridad de qué me acusas.

—De haber impedido que Pansy se case con lord Warburton. ¿Te parece lo bastante claro?

—Al contrario, puse mucho interés en que ocurriera, como ya te dije. Y cuando tú me dijiste que confiabas en mí,

pues creo que esas fueron tus palabras, acepté esa obligación. Fui una tonta al aceptarla, pero el caso es que lo hice.

—Fingiste que la aceptabas, e incluso fingiste que no lo hacías de muy buena gana para que yo confiase aún más en ti. Y entonces pusiste todo tu ingenio en funcionamiento para librarte de él.

—Creo que entiendo lo que quieres decir —dijo Isabel.

—¿Dónde está esa carta que dijiste que me había escrito? —preguntó su marido.

—No tengo la menor idea. No se lo he preguntado.

—Tú impediste que la enviara —afirmó Osmond.

Isabel se levantó lentamente. Allí de pie, con el manto blanco que le llegaba a los pies, podría haber pasado por el ángel del desdén, primo hermano del de la compasión.

—Ay, Gilbert, ¡y pensar que eras tan refinado…! —dijo con un largo murmullo.

—Nunca lo he sido tanto como tú. Has hecho todo lo que has querido. Te libras de él sin que lo parezca, y me pones a mí en la posición en la que querías verme: en la de un hombre que ha intentado casar a su hija con un lord y ha fracasado de forma grotesca.

—Pansy no está interesada en él, y se alegra mucho de que se haya ido —alegó Isabel.

—Eso no tiene nada que ver.

—Y a él tampoco le interesa Pansy.

—No me vengas con esas, porque primero me dijiste que sí. No entiendo por qué querías llevarte esa satisfacción en concreto —continuó Osmond—, cuando podrías haber elegido cualquier otra. No creo haber sido presuntuoso, ni haber dado demasiadas cosas por sentado. De hecho he sido muy modesto y discreto al respecto. Ni siquiera se me ocurrió la idea a mí. Él empezó a dar muestras de que le gustaba Pansy antes de que a mí se me pasara por la cabeza. Y yo te confié todo el asunto.

—Sí, fuiste muy amable al dejarlo todo en mis manos. Después de esto, espero que te encargues tú solo de esas cosas.

Osmond la miró un momento y después se dio la vuelta.

—Creía que apreciabas mucho a mi hija.

—Y nunca la he apreciado tanto como hoy.

—Ese afecto tuyo tiene unas limitaciones enormes. Aunque, tal vez, eso sea natural.

—¿Era eso todo lo que querías decirme? —preguntó Isabel al tiempo que cogía una vela de una de las mesas.

—¿Has quedado ya satisfecha? ¿Te parece que mi decepción es lo bastante grande?

—No creo que en el fondo estés tan decepcionado. Al fin y al cabo, esto te ha proporcionado otra oportunidad para intentar dejarme estupefacta.

—No se trata de eso. Esto ha servido para demostrar que Pansy puede apuntar alto.

—¡Pobre Pansy…! —dijo Isabel mientras se alejaba con la vela.

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Fue por Henrietta Stackpole por quien supo Isabel que Caspar Goodwood había llegado a Roma, lo cual tuvo lugar tres días después de la partida de lord Warburton. Ese último hecho se había visto precedido por un incidente de cierta importancia para Isabel: la ausencia temporal, una vez más, de madame Merle, que se había marchado a Nápoles para pasar unos días con una amiga, la afortunada propietaria de una villa en Posilippo. Madame Merle había dejado de velar por la felicidad de Isabel, quien de pronto se preguntó si la más discreta de las mujeres no sería también por un casual la más peligrosa. A veces, de noche, tenía extrañas visiones: le parecía ver a su marido y a su amiga —la amiga de él— en una borrosa e indistinguible combinación. Le parecía que aquella dama todavía no había dicho su última palabra, sino que tenía algo en reserva. Isabel aplicaba activamente toda su imaginación a intentar elucidar esa escurridiza cuestión, pero de vez en cuando se veía refrenada por un temor inefable, de manera que cuando aquella encantadora mujer se marchó de Roma casi sintió alivio. Ya se había enterado por la señorita Stackpole de que Caspar Goodwood estaba en Europa, pues Henrietta le había escrito para comunicárselo nada más encontrárselo en París. El propio Caspar nunca escribía a Isabel y, por mucho que estuviese en Europa, esta no creyó muy probable que quisiera verla. Su última entrevista, antes del matrimonio de ella, se había parecido bastante a una ruptura definitiva; creía recordar que él le había dicho que solo quería verla por última vez. Desde entonces Caspar se había convertido en la nota más discordante que sobrevivía en su pasado; de hecho, era el único que llevaba asociada consigo una permanente sensación de dolor. La había dejado aquella mañana bajo los efectos de una fuerte impresión del todo innecesaria: su encuentro había sido como una colisión de naves a plena luz del día. No había habido bruma ni corriente oculta que la justificara, y ella misma solo había deseado virar y alejarse. Sin embargo, Goodwood había chocado contra su proa mientras ella estaba al timón y, para completar la metáfora, había provocado en aquella embarcación más ligera una fractura que todavía en ocasiones se manifestaba por medio de un débil crujido. Había sido horrible verle, porque representaba el único daño serio que (al menos que supiera) había causado jamás a nadie: era la única persona que tenía contra ella una reclamación no satisfecha. Lo había hecho infeliz sin que pudiera hacer nada para evitarlo, y esa infelicidad no dejaba de ser una triste realidad. Ella había llorado de rabia después de que Goodwood se marchara, sin saber apenas por qué lo hacía: quería creer que había sido por la falta de consideración de él. Había ido a verla sintiéndose infeliz cuando la dicha de ella era tan perfecta, y había hecho todo lo posible para oscurecer el fulgor resplandeciente de aquellos rayos puros. No se había comportado de forma violenta y, sin embargo, tal era la impresión que le había dejado. Cuando menos había habido violencia en algo: quizá tan solo en su propio acceso de llanto, y en el malestar que le había seguido y que se había prolongado durante tres o cuatro días.

El efecto de esa súplica final de Caspar Goodwood se había desvanecido pronto, y durante todo su primer año de matrimonio Isabel lo había omitido de sus pensamientos. Era un tema de referencia ingrato, y resultaba desagradable tener que pensar en una persona que estaba dolida y resentida contigo y a quien sin embargo no podías aliviar de ninguna forma. Habría sido diferente si hubiese podido albergar alguna duda, por pequeña que fuese, de que había superado su aflicción, como la tenía de lord Warburton; pero, lamentablemente, eso estaba más allá de toda duda, y era justo ese aspecto agresivo e inflexible de la cuestión lo que la hacía tan poco atrayente. Isabel nunca podría convencerse de que se trataba de alguien que sufría pero que tenía sus compensaciones, como sí podía hacerlo en el caso de su pretendiente inglés. No tenía ninguna fe en las compensaciones del señor Goodwood, ni la menor estima por ellas. Una fábrica de algodón no era compensación de nada, y menos aún de no haber conseguido casarse con Isabel Archer. Y, sin embargo, aparte de eso, apenas sabía qué poseía él, a excepción, claro está, de sus cualidades intrínsecas. Sí, desde luego, en Caspar todo era intrínseco, y no creía que se dedicase a buscar ningún tipo de ayuda externa. Si ampliaba el negocio —lo cual, que ella supiera, era el único esfuerzo que se podría decidir a realizar—, sería porque se trataba de una iniciativa interesante o buena para el mismo, y no porque esperara de ese modo olvidar el pasado. Eso daba a su persona una especie de lóbrega desnudez que convertía el accidente de recordarlo o la aprensión a hacerlo en una peculiar conmoción; carecía del engalanado social que por lo general amortiguaba, en una era tan civilizada, la intensidad de los contactos humanos. Además, su perfecto silencio, el hecho de que nunca supiera nada de él y apenas oyera a nadie mencionarlo, agudizaba esa impresión de que se encontraba en la más

absoluta soledad. De vez en cuando preguntaba a Lily por él, pero esta no sabía nada de Boston: su imaginación limitaba al este solo con Madison Avenue. Con el transcurso del tiempo Isabel había pensado en él con más frecuencia y menos restricciones, y en más de una ocasión había tenido la idea de escribirle. Nunca había hablado de él a su marido; nunca había contado a Osmond las visitas que le había hecho en Florencia, reserva que en los primeros tiempos no le había venido dictada por ninguna falta de confianza en Osmond, sino sencillamente por creer que la decepción del joven no era un secreto de ella, sino solo de él. Había pensado que no estaría bien por su parte hablar de ello a otra persona, y que, al fin y al cabo, los asuntos del señor Goodwood tampoco podían interesar mucho a Gilbert. Al final no había llegado a escribirle nunca porque le parecía que, teniendo en cuenta su dolor, lo menos que podía hacer era dejarlo en paz. No obstante, le habría gustado poder estar de algún modo más cerca de él. No se trataba de que se le hubiera ocurrido alguna vez la idea de que podría haber terminado casándose con él; incluso después de que las consecuencias de su actual unión se hubiesen vuelto tan vívidas, esa reflexión en particular, pese a las otras muchas que tenía, no había adquirido la suficiente fuerza para pasársele por la cabeza. Pero cuando Isabel se encontró en tan difícil situación, Goodwood se convirtió en un miembro más de ese círculo con el que quería congraciarse. Ya he mencionado cuánto necesitaba creer que su infelicidad no era culpa suya. No tenía ninguna perspectiva cercana de que fuera a morir, y sin embargo quería hacer las paces con el mundo, poner en orden sus asuntos espirituales. De vez en cuando la asaltaba la idea de que todavía tenía una cuenta pendiente con Goodwood, y en esos momentos se sentía dispuesta o capaz de saldarla en términos más favorables para él que antes. Aun así, cuando se enteró de que iba a viajar a Roma sintió mucho miedo, ya que sería más desagradable para él que para cualquier otro descubrir —pues sin duda lo haría, como si examinara un balance falsificado o algo por el estilo — el íntimo desbarajuste en los asuntos de Isabel. Esta tenía la profunda convicción de que él lo había invertido todo en la felicidad de ella, mientras que los demás solo habían invertido una parte. Era una persona más a la que tendría que ocultar su angustia. No obstante, se tranquilizó bastante después de que él llegara a Roma, pues pasaron varios días sin que fuese a verla.

Henrietta Stackpole, como podrá suponerse, se presentó con mayor puntualidad, e Isabel se vio grandemente favorecida por la compañía de su amiga. Se arrojó con ganas en brazos de esa amistad, pues, ya que había decidido tener la conciencia tranquila, era una forma de demostrar que no había sido alguien superficial… tanto más cuanto el paso de los años había enriquecido más que malogrado esas peculiaridades de Henrietta que habían sido jocosamente criticadas por personas menos interesadas que Isabel, y que todavía seguían siendo lo bastante marcadas para dar a la lealtad de Isabel un toque de heroísmo. Henrietta seguía tan aguda, rápida y fresca como siempre, e igual de pulcra, brillante y hermosa. Sus ojos, tan abiertos e iluminados como grandes y acristaladas estaciones de ferrocarril, no se habían cubierto con postigo alguno; su atuendo no había perdido nada de su tiesura, ni sus opiniones nada de sus referencias nacionales. No obstante, eso no significaba que no hubiese cambiado en absoluto, pues a Isabel la sorprendió el hecho de descubrir en ella cierta imprecisión. Antes nunca lo había sido; aunque se hiciera cargo de muchas pesquisas a la vez, siempre se las había arreglado para dedicarse a cada una de forma plena y deliberada. Tenía una razón para todo lo que hacía, y casi le sobraban los motivos. En el pasado, cuando iba a Europa era porque quería verla, pero ahora que la había visto, ya no tenía tal excusa. En ningún momento pretendió que el deseo de estudiar civilizaciones decadentes tuviese nada que ver con su actual empresa; su viaje era más una expresión de su independencia del viejo mundo que de la sensación de que tuviera mayores obligaciones hacia él. «No significa nada venir a Europa —le dijo a Isabel—. No creo que una necesite muchas razones para hacerlo. Lo que sí tiene valor es quedarse en casa, eso es mucho más importante.» Así pues, no fue con la intención de hacer algo muy importante por lo que se regaló ese nuevo peregrinaje a Roma, pues ya conocía el lugar y lo había explorado con minuciosidad. Aquel acto era tan solo una señal de estar familiarizada con la ciudad, de saberlo todo sobre ella, de tener tanto derecho como el que más a estar allí. Todo eso estaba muy bien, y Henrietta seguía siendo igual de incansable; ya puestos, también tenía perfecto derecho a serlo. Pero, al fin y al cabo, tenía una razón mejor para ir a Roma que la de que le importara tan poco ir. Isabel se dio cuenta enseguida, y con ello del valor de la lealtad de su amiga. Había cruzado el tormentoso océano en mitad del invierno porque se había figurado que Isabel estaba triste. Henrietta solía figurarse muchas cosas, pero nunca lo había hecho con tanto acierto. Las satisfacciones de Isabel en esos momentos eran muy escasas, pero incluso de haber sido más numerosas habría seguido sintiendo esa alegría en especial de estar en lo correcto al haber tenido siempre a Henrietta en tan alta estima. Había hecho grandes concesiones con respecto a ella, pero aun así seguía insistiendo en que, pese a todo, era una mujer muy valiosa. Sin embargo, no era su propio triunfo lo que la complacía, sino simplemente el alivio de confesar a esa confidente, la primera persona a la que se lo

reconoció, que no estaba bien en absoluto. La propia Henrietta había sacado el tema sin mayor dilación, y la había acusado abiertamente de ser desdichada. Era una mujer, una hermana; no era Ralph, ni lord Warburton, ni Caspar Goodwood, así que Isabel podía hablar.

—Sí, soy desdichada —contestó con mucha suavidad.

Odiaba oírse diciéndolo, por lo que intentó hacerlo de la forma más juiciosa posible.

—¿Qué te hace tu marido? —preguntó Henrietta con el ceño fruncido, como si estuviese investigando los procedimientos de un curandero.

—No me hace nada. Pero no me quiere.

—¡Es demasiado difícil de contentar! —exclamó la señorita Stackpole—. ¿Por qué no le dejas?

—No puedo cambiar de ese modo —dijo Isabel.

—¿Y me puedes explicar por qué no? Lo que no quieres es reconocer que has cometido un error. Eres demasiado orgullosa.

—No sé si lo soy, pero no puedo hacer público mi error. No creo que sea decente. Antes prefiero morir.

—No pensarás siempre así —dijo Henrietta.

—No sé a qué extremos podría llevarme el ser enormemente desdichada, pero creo que siempre me sentiría avergonzada. Uno tiene que aceptar sus acciones. Me casé con él ante todo el mundo de forma totalmente libre, por mi propia voluntad; no podría haber hecho nada más intencionado. No se puede cambiar de ese modo —repitió Isabel.

—Pero es que has cambiado, por muy imposible que te parezca. Espero que no irás a decirme que aún te gusta tu marido.

Isabel lo meditó durante unos instantes.

—No, no me gusta. Te lo puedo decir a ti porque estoy cansada de guardar el secreto, pero nada más. Tampoco puedo proclamarlo a los cuatro vientos.

Henrietta se rió.

—¿No te parece que eres demasiado considerada?

—No soy considerada con él, sino conmigo —contestó Isabel.

No era de extrañar que Gilbert Osmond no sintiera gran aprecio por la señorita Stackpole; de forma natural su instinto lo había puesto en guardia contra una joven que era capaz de aconsejar a su esposa que abandonara el hogar conyugal. Ante la llegada de Henrietta a Roma, le había dicho a Isabel que esperaba que dejase en paz a su amiga la entrevistadora, y aquella le había contestado que por lo que a él respectaba no tenía nada que temer de ella. Después explicó a Henrietta que, como no le caía bien a Osmond, no podía invitarla a cenar, pero que había otras muchas formas de verse sin problemas. Así pues, Isabel recibía libremente a la señorita Stackpole en su sala de estar, y salieron varias veces a pasear en el carruaje, donde Henrietta se sentaba cara a cara con Pansy, la cual, inclinándose un poco hacia delante en el asiento de enfrente, miraba a la célebre autora con una respetuosa atención que a esta en ocasiones le resultaba irritante. Se quejó a Isabel de que la señorita Osmond tenía una expresión como de querer recordar todo lo que uno decía.

—No quiero que se me recuerde de esa forma —afirmó la señorita Stackpole—. Considero que mi conversación solo se refiere al presente, como los periódicos matutinos. Tu hijastra, ahí sentada, me mira como si fuera conservando todos los números atrasados y cualquier día pudiera sacarlos para utilizarlos contra mí.

No conseguía hacerse una buena opinión de Pansy, cuya falta de iniciativa, de conversación, de ambiciones personales, le parecían poco naturales e incluso muy extrañas en una chica de veinte años. Isabel se dio cuenta enseguida de que a Osmond le habría gustado que defendiera con más ardor la causa de su amiga, que le insistiera un poco para que la recibiera, de modo que pareciese que él se veía obligado a sufrir por la necesidad de mantener las buenas formas. El que Isabel hubiese aceptado de inmediato sus objeciones lo hacía quedar en muy mal lugar; de hecho una de las desventajas de demostrar desprecio era que al mismo tiempo uno no podía ganarse el mérito de poder expresar aprecio. Osmond quería aferrarse a ese mérito pero a la vez también a sus objeciones, y ambos elementos eran muy difíciles de reconciliar. Lo correcto habría sido que la señorita Stackpole fuese a cenar al palazzo Roccanera una o dos veces, de modo que ella pudiese (pese a la cortesía superficial de Osmond, siempre tan grande) juzgar por sí misma lo poco que a él le gustaba su presencia. Sin embargo, ya que ambas damas habían decidido mostrarse tan poco complacientes, lo único que podía hacer Osmond era desear que la de Nueva York se marchase cuanto antes. Era sorprendente lo poco que le satisfacían las amistades de su esposa, y aprovechó la ocasión para

hacérselo saber a esta.

—Desde luego no has sido muy afortunada con tus amigos íntimos; ojalá hicieses otros nuevos —le dijo una mañana sin referirse a nada concreto en esos momentos, pero en un tono de madurada reflexión que privaba al comentario de cualquier aire de exabrupto—. Es como si te hubieras tomado la molestia de elegir a las personas de este mundo con las que menos tengo en común. Tu primo siempre me ha parecido un asno engreído, además del ser menos agraciado que conozco. Pero resulta insufrible y tedioso no poder decírselo, ya que siempre hay que tener su mala salud en consideración. Precisamente su salud me parece lo mejor de él, pues le concede unos privilegios de los que nadie más disfruta. Si de verdad está tan enfermo, solo tiene una forma de demostrarlo, pero no parece muy dispuesto a ello. Tampoco es que pueda decir mucho más del gran Warburton. Cuando te paras a pensarlo, la fría insolencia de aquella actuación suya fue algo digno de ver. Se presenta aquí y examina a la hija de uno como si fuese un apartamento; prueba los picaportes y mira por las ventanas, da golpecitos en las paredes y casi se decide a quedárselo. ¿Será tan amable de redactar el contrato de arrendamiento? Pero entonces llega a la conclusión de que, en conjunto, las habitaciones son demasiado pequeñas; no cree que pueda vivir en un tercer piso; tiene que buscar un *piano nobile*. Y se marcha después de haberse alojado gratis un mes en el pobre y diminuto apartamento. Aun así, la señorita Stackpole es tu hallazgo más increíble. Se me antoja una especie de monstruo. No hay nervio en el cuerpo que ella no consiga crispar. Ya sabes que nunca he admitido que sea una mujer. ¿Sabes a lo que me recuerda? A una pluma estilográfica nueva de acero, el objeto más odioso del mundo. Habla igual que escribe una pluma de acero; por cierto, ¿no usa papel rayado para las cartas? Piensa, se mueve, camina y mira exactamente igual que habla. Me da lo mismo que me digas que no puede fastidiar porque no la veo. No la veo, pero la oigo; la oigo todo el día. Tengo su voz metida en la cabeza, y no hay forma de librarme de ella. Sé con exactitud todo lo que dice, y cada inflexión del tono en que lo dice. Dice cosas encantadoras de mí, que te proporcionan gran consuelo. No me gusta nada la idea de que hable de mí. Hace que me sienta como si supiera que un lacayo se pone mi sombrero.

Como su esposa le aseguró, Henrietta hablaba de Gilbert Osmond bastante menos de lo que él sospechaba. Tenía otros muchos temas de conversación, dos de los cuales en concreto es de suponer que interesarán al lector. Así le dijo a Isabel que Caspar Goodwood había descubierto por sí mismo que esta era infeliz, por más que, pese a todo su ingenio, Henrietta fuera incapaz de imaginar qué consuelo esperaba él proporcionar a Isabel yendo a Roma si no pasaba a visitarla. Se lo encontraron dos veces en la calle, pero no pareció verlas. Iban en el carruaje, y él tenía la costumbre de mirar fijamente hacia delante, como si solo quisiera aprehender un único objeto cada vez. Para Isabel fue como si lo hubiera visto el día anterior, porque debía de ser justo con ese paso y esa cara con los que había salido por la puerta de la señora Touchett tras finalizar su último encuentro. Iba vestido igual que ese día; Isabel recordaba el color de su pañuelo, pero, pese a ese aspecto familiar, también había algo extraño en su figura, algo que le hizo sentir de nuevo que era terrible que él estuviese en Roma. Parecía más grande e imponente que antaño, y eso que ya lo recordaba muy alto. Isabel se dio cuenta de que la gente con la que se cruzaba se daba la vuelta para mirarlo, pero él seguía avanzando con mucha determinación, alzando por encima de ellos un rostro que era como el cielo de febrero.

El otro tema de conversación de la señorita Stackpole era bien distinto, pues contó a Isabel las últimas noticias sobre el señor Bantling. Este había ido a Estados Unidos el año anterior, y ella se alegraba de haber podido dedicarle bastante atención. No sabía hasta qué punto le había gustado el país, pero sí que se atrevía a decir que le había hecho mucho bien, ya que al marcharse no era el mismo hombre que cuando llegó. Le había abierto los ojos y le había enseñado que Inglaterra no lo era todo. Había caído muy bien en casi todas partes, se opinaba de él que era muy sencillo… más de lo que por lo general se consideraba allí a los ingleses. No faltó quien pensó que era un tanto afectado, aunque Henrietta no sabía si con eso querían decir que su sencillez era mera afectación. Algunas de las preguntas que hacía eran lamentables: creía que todas las camareras de hotel eran hijas de granjeros, o que todas las hijas de granjeros eran camareras de hotel… no recordaba bien cómo era. No había sido capaz de apreciar del todo el excelente sistema educativo del país, que escapaba a su comprensión. En general se había comportado como si hubiese demasiado de todo y solo pudiera quedarse con una pequeña parte, y la que había elegido era la de los hoteles y la navegación fluvial. Parecía haber quedado muy fascinado por los primeros, y tenía una fotografía de cada uno de los que había visitado. Pero los barcos de vapor eran su principal interés, y nada le gustaba más que navegar en aquellos grandes buques. Habían viajado juntos de Nueva York a Milwaukee, haciendo escala en las ciudades de mayor interés, y cada vez que se disponían a partir él quería saber si podrían hacerlo a bordo de un vapor. No parecía tener la menor idea de geografía; creía que Baltimore era una ciudad del oeste, y a cada momento esperaba llegar al

Mississippi. Daba la impresión de que nunca había oído hablar de ningún río de Estados Unidos salvo del Mississippi, por lo que no pareció estar preparado para admitir la existencia del Hudson, aunque finalmente se vio obligado a confesar que estaba a la altura del Rin. Habían pasado algunos ratos agradables en los trenes, en los que no dejaba de pedir helado al camarero de color. No conseguía acostumbrarse a la idea de que pudieses hacer algo así en un tren. Por supuesto, era algo que no se podía pedir en los trenes ingleses, ni tampoco abanicos, ni caramelos, ni nada de nada. El calor le había resultado bastante insoportable, y Henrietta le había dicho que suponía que era el mayor que había tenido que aguantar jamás. En estos momentos se encontraba en Inglaterra de caza, o «cazando por ahí», como dijo Henrietta. Eran distracciones propias de los pieles rojas americanos, los placeres de la caza que habíamos abandonado largo tiempo atrás. Al parecer existía en Inglaterra la creencia generalizada de que llevábamos tomahawk y plumas, pero tal costumbre estaba más en consonancia con los hábitos ingleses. El señor Bantling no dispondría de tiempo para reunirse con Henrietta en Italia, pero esperaba hacerlo cuando ella volviese a París. Tenía muchas ganas de ver Versalles de nuevo, pues apreciaba mucho el antiguo *règime*. No coincidían en ese punto, pues lo que precisamente le gustaba a ella de Versalles era que allí podía verse cómo habían acabado con el antiguo *règime*. Allí ya no había duques ni marqueses; por el contrario, lo que mejor recordaba era un día en que había visto a cinco familias estadounidenses recorriendo tranquilamente el lugar. Por otra parte, el señor Bantling tenía muchas ganas de que Henrietta se decidiese a ir a Inglaterra, pues pensaba que ahora lo encontraría todo mejor, ya que Inglaterra había cambiado mucho en dos o tres años. Estaba empeñado en que, si iba, él mismo iría a ver a su hermana, lady Pensil, y esa vez le haría llegar a Henrietta en persona la invitación de aquella. El misterio de aquella otra invitación nunca había quedado resuelto.

Caspar Goodwood fue finalmente al palazzo Roccanera, tras escribir de antemano una nota a Isabel solicitando su permiso. Esta se lo concedió de inmediato, informándole de que estaría en casa esa tarde a las seis. Pasó todo el día preguntándose por el motivo de su visita, qué beneficio esperaba sacar de ella. Hasta entonces Goodwood siempre se había presentado como alguien carente de la facultad de transigir, como alguien que conseguía lo que pedía o no quería nada. No obstante, la hospitalidad de Isabel no suscitó ninguna duda, y a esta no le fue muy difícil aparentar ser feliz para engañarlo. Al menos estaba convencida de haberlo engañado, de haber conseguido que se dijera para sus adentros que, después de todo, estaba mal informado. Pero también observó, o eso le pareció, que él no se mostraba decepcionado, como estaba segura de que algunos otros hombres sí habrían hecho. Goodwood no había ido a Roma en busca de otra oportunidad. Ella no llegó a averiguar a qué había ido, ya que no le ofreció ninguna explicación, y concluyó que no debía haber otra más que la muy sencilla de que quería verla. En otras palabras, había ido a Roma por placer. Isabel ahondó en ese razonamiento con gran interés, y quedó encantada de dar con la fórmula que eliminaba el fantasma del antiguo resentimiento de él. El que hubiera ido a Roma por placer era justo lo que ella quería, ya que si tenía ganas de divertirse eso significaba que había superado su dolor. Si había superado su dolor, entonces todo había vuelto a su cauce y la responsabilidad de ella había tocado a su fin. Cierto era que él se tomaba esa diversión con algo de rigidez, pero tampoco había sido nunca muy desenvuelto o fácil de complacer, por lo que Isabel tenía todos los motivos del mundo para creer que estaba satisfecho con lo que veía. Henrietta no era su confidente, aunque él sí lo fuera de ella, de manera que Isabel no pudo obtener de esta ningún detalle adicional sobre cómo se sentía. No era muy proclive a conversar sobre temas generales; Isabel recordó que años atrás había dicho de él: «El señor Goodwood habla mucho, pero dice poco». Ahora hablaba mucho, pero puede que dijera menos que nunca; teniendo en cuenta, claro está, lo mucho que había en Roma sobre lo que hablar. Estaba claro que su llegada no había sido planeada para suavizar las relaciones de Isabel con su marido, pues si el señor Osmond no sentía la menor simpatía por sus amigos, el señor Goodwood no podía aducir más mérito que el de ser uno de los más antiguos. Lo único que Isabel podía decir acerca de él era que se trataba del más antiguo, y ese resumen tan sucinto en sí mismo agotaba los hechos. Se había visto obligada a presentárselo a Gilbert, del mismo modo que había resultado imposible no invitarlo a cenar durante sus veladas de los jueves, de las que estaba bastante cansada pero a las que su marido seguía aferrándose no tanto con la intención de invitar a determinada gente, sino más bien con la de no invitar a otra.

El señor Goodwood asistía a las veladas de los jueves con regularidad y solemnidad, y siempre bastante temprano, y parecía observarlos a todos con suma gravedad. De vez en cuando Isabel sentía un acceso de ira, ya que había algo de obtuso en Goodwood; incluso pensó que tal vez este fuera consciente de que ella no sabía que hacer con él. Pero tampoco podía llamarlo estúpido, ya que no lo era en absoluto, sino que se trataba tan solo de una persona extraordinariamente honesta. El ser tan honesto hacía a un hombre muy distinto a la mayoría de la gente, y obligaba

a ser casi igual de honesto con él. Isabel llegó a esa conclusión al tiempo que se congratulaba de haberlo convencido de ser la más despreocupada de las mujeres. En ningún momento planteó él duda alguna al respecto, ni le hizo ninguna pregunta personal. Goodwood se llevaba mejor con Osmond de lo que en un principio habría parecido posible. A Osmond le desagradaba mucho que lo consideraran alguien previsible, y cuando se daba tal caso sentía la irresistible necesidad de llevar la contraria. Fue en virtud de ese principio por lo que se concedió el gusto de hacer que le cayese bien un bostoniano cuadriculado al que se esperaba que tratase con frialdad. Preguntó a Isabel si el señor Goodwood también había querido casarse con ella, y se mostró sorprendido al saber que lo había rechazado. Habría sido algo excelente, como vivir bajo un alto campanario que daría todas las horas y produciría una extraña vibración en las capas de aire más altas. Afirmó que le gustaba hablar con el gran Goodwood; no era fácil al principio, pues había que ascender por una interminable escalera muy empinada hasta llegar a lo alto de la torre, pero, una vez que estabas allí, había grandes vistas y se disfrutaba de una fresca y agradable brisa. Osmond, como ya sabemos, tenía algunas cualidades deliciosas, y concedió a Caspar Goodwood el beneficio de todas ellas. Isabel vio que este se hacía mejor opinión de su marido de lo que le habría gustado; aquella mañana en Florencia Caspar le había dado la impresión de ser incapaz de hacerse una buena impresión de nadie. Gilbert no dejaba de invitarlo a cenar, tras lo que el señor Goodwood se fumaba un cigarro con él y hasta le pedía que le enseñara sus colecciones. Gilbert le comentó a Isabel que su amigo era un hombre muy original, tan fuerte y con tan buen estilo como un baúl de viaje inglés, de esos que tenían muchas correas y hebillas que nunca se desgastaban y un excelente cierre. De día Caspar Goodwood acostumbraba a cabalgar por la Campania, dedicando mucho tiempo a dicho ejercicio, por lo que Isabel lo veía fundamentalmente de noche. Un día esta se decidió a decirle que quería pedirle un favor. Y añadió sonriendo:

—Aunque no sé si tengo derecho a pedirle ninguno.

—Es usted la persona de este mundo que más derecho tiene —contestó él—. Yo le he dado garantías que no he dado a nadie más.

El favor era que fuese a ver a su primo Ralph, que se encontraba enfermo y solo en el Hôtel de Paris, y lo tratase con mucha amabilidad. El señor Goodwood no le había visto nunca, pero reconocería enseguida al pobre infeliz. Isabel creía recordar que Ralph lo había invitado una vez a Gardencourt. Caspar sí que recordaba perfectamente la invitación y, aunque se suponía que era un hombre de escasa imaginación, tenía la suficiente para ponerse en el lugar de un pobre caballero que yacía moribundo en una pensión romana. Así pues, fue al Hôtel de Paris y, al ser conducido ante la presencia del dueño de Gardencourt, encontró a la señorita Stackpole sentada junto a su sofá. De hecho, la relación de esa dama con Ralph Touchett había experimentado un cambio singular. Isabel no le había pedido que fuese a verlo, pero al enterarse Henrietta de que estaba demasiado enfermo para salir, había ido de inmediato por iniciativa propia. Desde entonces lo visitaba a diario, siempre bajo la convicción de que eran grandes enemigos. «Sí, somos enemigos íntimos», solía decir Ralph, que la acusaba con toda libertad —tanta como permitía el tono de la situación— de ir a darle la lata hasta que muriese. En realidad se habían convertido en excelentes amigos, y Henrietta se extrañaba mucho de que no le hubiese caído bien antes. Ella le caía a él tan bien como siempre, pues nunca había dudado ni por un momento de que se trataba de una mujer excepcional. Hablaban de todo y siempre discrepaban; de todo, esto es, excepto de Isabel: un tema sobre el que Ralph siempre se llevaba un delgado índice a los labios. El señor Bantling, por el contrario, resultaba ser un gran recurso, puesto que Ralph era capaz de pasarse horas hablando de él con Henrietta. La conversación tenía, por supuesto, el aliciente de que sus puntos de vista eran diferentes, como no podría ser de otro modo, ya que Ralph se divertía sosteniendo la opinión de que el afable ex miembro de la Guardia Real era un consumado Maquiavelo. Caspar Goodwood no podía aportar nada a dicho debate, pero, una vez que se quedó a solas con su anfitrión, descubrió que había varios temas de los que podían hablar. Hemos de admitir que la dama que acababa de marcharse no era uno de ellos; Goodwood concedía a la señorita Stackpole todos sus méritos por adelantado, y no tenía ningún comentario posterior que hacer sobre ella. Tras unas alusiones iniciales, los dos hombres tampoco se explayaron sobre la señora Osmond, puesto que era un tema en el que Goodwood percibía tantos peligros como Ralph. Caspar sintió mucha lástima por aquel personaje inclasificable; no soportaba ver a un hombre tan agradable, pese a todas sus rarezas, más allá de cualquier posibilidad de ayuda. Para Goodwood siempre había alguna posibilidad de ayuda, que en su caso consistió en repetir varias veces su visita al Hôtel de Paris. A Isabel le pareció que había obrado con mucha inteligencia, ya que se había deshecho con astucia del superfluo Goodwood. Le había dado una ocupación al convertirlo en cuidador de Ralph. Incluso había planeado que el caballero acompañase a su primo en su viaje al norte en cuanto la llegada del buen tiempo lo permitiese. Lord

Warburton había traído a Ralph a Roma, y el señor Goodwood se lo llevaría. Parecía haber una feliz simetría en aquello, e Isabel tenía muchas ganas de que Ralph se marchase. Vivía con el miedo constante de que muriese allí, ante sus ojos, y con el terror de que sucediese en una pensión, tan cerca de su puerta, por la que él había entrado en tan pocas ocasiones. Ralph tenía que sumirse en el descanso eterno en su propia y querida casa, en una de aquellas estancias profundas y sombrías de Gardencourt en las que la oscura hiedra se arremolinaba en torno al resplandor trémulo de las ventanas. En esos días sentía Isabel que había algo sagrado en Gardencourt, que ningún episodio de su pasado era tan irrecuperable. Cuando pensaba en los meses que había pasado allí se le llenaban los ojos de lágrimas. Como digo, se felicitaba por su ingenio, pero iba a necesitar de todo el que pudiera hacer acopio, pues ocurrieron varios hechos que parecieron desafiarla. La condesa Gemini llegó de Florencia… con sus baúles, sus vestidos, su parloteo, sus falsedades, su frivolidad, la extraña y pecaminosa leyenda de su gran cantidad de amantes. Edward Rosier, que había estado ausente —nadie, ni siquiera Pansy, sabía dónde—, reapareció en Roma y comenzó a escribirle largas cartas que ella nunca contestaba. Madame Merle volvió de Nápoles y le preguntó con una extraña sonrisa:

—¿Qué demonios le has hecho a lord Warburton?

¡Como si fuese asunto de ella!

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Un día, hacia finales de febrero, Ralph Touchett decidió volver a Inglaterra. Poseía sus propias razones para tomar tal decisión, que no tenía por qué explicar; pero Henrietta Stackpole, a quien comunicó sus intenciones, creyó adivinarlas. No obstante, se abstuvo de decirlo, tan solo comentó al cabo de un instante, mientras estaba sentada junto a su sofá:

—Supongo que sabrás que no puedes ir solo.

—No tengo intención de hacer tal cosa —respondió Ralph—. Vendrá gente conmigo.

—¿Qué quiere decir «gente»? ¿Sirvientes a los que pagas?

—Bueno —dijo Ralph con jocosidad—, al fin y al cabo son seres humanos.

—¿Y habrá alguna mujer entre ellos? —quiso saber la señorita Stackpole.

—¡Hablas como si tuviera una docena! No, confieso que no dispongo de una frívola doncella a mi cargo.

—Bien —dijo Henrietta con calma—, en tal caso no puedes viajar a Inglaterra. Necesitas los cuidados de una mujer.

—He recibido tantos de ti esta última quincena que me durarán mucho tiempo.

—Todavía no son bastantes. Creo que iré contigo.

—¿Que vendrás conmigo? —dijo Ralph mientras se incorporaba lentamente en el sofá.

—Sí. Ya sé que no te caigo bien, pero voy a ir contigo de todos modos. Creo que será mejor para tu salud que vuelvas a echarte.

Ralph la observó durante unos instantes, y luego se tendió poco a poco.

—Me caes muy bien —dijo al momento.

La señorita Stackpole lanzó una de sus infrecuentes risas.

—No creas que diciendo eso me vas a comprar. Pienso ir contigo y, lo que es más, te cuidaré.

—Eres una mujer muy buena —afirmó Ralph.

—Espera a que te deje sano y salvo en casa antes de decir eso. No va a ser tarea fácil. Pero, de todas, formas es lo mejor que puedes hacer.

Antes de que se marchara, Ralph le preguntó:

—¿De verdad quieres cuidarme?

—Bueno, por lo menos quiero intentarlo.

—En ese caso debo informarte de que me rindo. ¡Me rindo!

Y quizá fuera una señal de su sumisión el que, unos minutos después de que ella lo hubiera dejado solo, estallara en un fuerte ataque de risa. Emprender un viaje por Europa bajo la supervisión de la señorita Stackpole le parecía una gran incongruencia, una prueba concluyente de que había abdicado de todas sus funciones y renunciado a todo ejercicio. Y realmente lo más extraño de todo era que dicha perspectiva le agradaba; se sentía sumiso de una forma grata y suntuosa. Incluso estaba impaciente por partir, y sin duda tenía unas ganas inmensas de volver a ver su casa. El final de todo estaba cerca; era como si, con solo estirar el brazo, pudiera tocar la meta. Pero quería morir en casa; ese era el único deseo que le quedaba: tenderse en la habitación grande y tranquila en la que había visto yacer a su padre por última vez y cerrar los ojos en un amanecer de verano.

Ese mismo día Caspar Goodwood fue a verlo, y Ralph informó a su visitante de que la señorita Stackpole se había hecho cargo de él y lo iba a llevar de vuelta a Inglaterra.

—En ese caso —dijo Caspar—, me temo que seré uno más de la expedición, porque la señora Osmond me ha hecho prometerle que iré con usted.

—¡Santo cielo, esto es la edad de oro! Son todos demasiado amables.

—Por mi parte, la amabilidad es hacia ella; apenas hacia usted.

—Por descontado, ella es realmente amable —dijo Ralph con una sonrisa.

—¿Por conseguir que la gente le acompañe? Sí, es una forma de amabilidad —contestó Goodwood sin prestarse a seguir la broma—. Aun así, por lo que a mí respecta —añadió—, me atrevería a decir que prefiero viajar con usted y

con la señorita Stackpole que con esta sola.

—Y preferiría aún más quedarse aquí y no hacer ninguna de las dos cosas —dijo Ralph—. De verdad que no hace falta que venga. Henrietta es muy eficiente.

—Estoy seguro de eso, pero se lo he prometido a la señora Osmond.

—No le costará mucho conseguir que lo dispense.

—Ella no haría eso por nada del mundo. Quiere que cuide de usted, pero no es ese el principal motivo. El principal motivo es que quiere que me vaya de Roma.

—Creo que se imagina usted demasiadas cosas —sugirió Ralph.

—La aburro —prosiguió Goodwood—. Ya no sabe qué decirme, así que se ha inventado eso.

—Ah, entonces, si es porque a ella le conviene, claro que lo llevaré a usted conmigo. Aunque no veo por qué habría de convenirle —añadió Ralph enseguida.

—Bueno, cree que la estoy vigilando —se limitó a decir Caspar Goodwood.

—¿Vigilando?

—Para averiguar si es feliz.

—Eso es muy fácil de averiguar —dijo Ralph—. Salta a la vista que es la mujer más feliz que conozco.

—En efecto, y me alegra que así sea —afirmó Goodwood de forma cortante, pese a lo cual tenía algo más que decir —: La he estado vigilando. Soy un viejo amigo y me creo con derecho a hacerlo. Ella finge ser feliz porque es lo que se ha propuesto ser, así que quería comprobar por mí mismo hasta qué punto lo ha conseguido. Como ya lo he comprobado —añadió en un tono de voz más áspero—, no quiero ver más. Ya me puedo marchar.

—¿Sabe que me da a mí que es hora de que lo haga?

Y esa fue la única conversación que ambos caballeros mantuvieron acerca de Isabel Osmond.

Henrietta hizo los preparativos del viaje, y en medio de estos consideró oportuno aclarar algunas cosas con la condesa Gemini cuando esta le devolvió en su pensión de Roma la visita que ella le había hecho en Florencia.

—Estaba usted muy equivocada con respecto a lord Warburton —señaló a la condesa—. Creo que debe saberlo.

—¿Sobre que le hiciera la corte a Isabel? Pero, mi querida señora, si iba a su casa tres veces al día. ¡Hasta han quedado las huellas de su paso por allí! —exclamó la condesa.

—Quería casarse con su sobrina. Por eso iba a la casa.

La condesa la miró fijamente, y después, con una risa descontrolada, dijo:

—¿Es eso lo que dice Isabel? No está mal, a fin de cuentas. Pero, si quiere casarse con mi sobrina, ¿por qué no lo hace? Puede que haya ido a comprar el anillo de bodas y vuelva con él el mes que viene, cuando yo ya no esté.

—No, no va a volver. La señorita Osmond no quiere casarse con él.

—¡Vaya, qué complaciente la niña! Sabía que apreciaba mucho a Isabel, pero no hasta esos extremos.

—No entiendo a lo que se refiere —dijo Henrietta con frialdad, pensando en lo perversa y desagradable que estaba siendo la condesa—. Pero mantengo lo que le digo: que Isabel nunca alentó las galanterías de lord Warburton.

—Mi querida amiga, ¿y qué sabemos nosotras de eso? Lo único que sabemos es que mi hermano es capaz de cualquier cosa.

—No sé de qué es capaz su hermano —dijo Henrietta muy dignamente.

—No me quejo precisamente de que Isabel alentara a Warburton, sino de que hiciera que se fuese. Tengo mucho interés en verlo. ¿Cree que ella pensó que yo haría que fuera desleal? —continuó la condesa con audaz insistencia—. Da igual, solo se lo está guardando para ella, eso se nota. La casa está llena de él, hasta en el mismo aire. Oh, sí, ha dejado sus huellas. Y estoy segura de que aún lo veré.

—Bueno —dijo Henrietta al cabo de un momento, con una de esas inspiraciones que tanto éxito habían proporcionado a sus crónicas en el *Interviewer*—, puede que con usted tenga más éxito que con Isabel.

Cuando Henrietta contó a su amiga el ofrecimiento que había hecho a Ralph, Isabel contestó que no podría haber hecho nada que la complaciese más. Siempre había estado convencida de que, en el fondo, Ralph y esa joven estaban hechos para entenderse.

—Me da igual que me entienda o no —afirmó Henrietta—. Lo importante es que no se muera en un vagón de tren.

—No lo hará —dijo Isabel, negando con la cabeza para reafirmar su convencimiento.

—No lo hará si puedo evitarlo. Ya veo que quieres que nos vayamos todos. Pero no sé qué quieres hacer tú.

—Quiero estar sola —dijo Isabel.

—Pues no lo estarás mientras sigas teniendo tanta compañía en casa.

—Bah, son parte de la comedia. Y vosotros los espectadores.

—¿Llamas a esto comedia, Isabel Archer? —preguntó Henrietta en tono bastante severo.

—Llámalo tragedia, si lo prefieres. El caso es que estáis todos observándome, y eso me hace sentirme muy incómoda.

Henrietta meditó unos instantes sobre esa cuestión.

—Eres como el ciervo herido, que busca la sombra más recóndita. ¡Ay, qué sensación de impotencia me produces! —exclamó.

—No me siento así en absoluto. Tengo intención de hacer muchas cosas.

—No estaba hablando de ti, sino de mí. Es demasiado: haber venido aquí a propósito y tener que dejarte igual que cuando llegué.

—No es cierto. Ha sido muy refrescante —dijo Isabel.

—¡Vaya refresco más ligero… una limonada agria! Quiero que me prometas algo.

—No puedo. No pienso volver a prometer nada. Hice una promesa muy solemne hace cuatro años y no se me ha dado nada bien cumplirla.

—Porque no te han alentado lo suficiente. Pero en este caso yo te daré todos los ánimos que necesites. Deja a tu marido antes de que ocurra lo peor. Eso es lo que quiero que me prometas.

—¿Lo peor? ¿A qué llamas tú lo peor?

—Antes de que se te estropee el carácter.

—¿Te refieres a mi buena disposición? No se va a estropear —respondió Isabel con una sonrisa—. Ya me encargo yo de cuidarla. Lo que me sorprende mucho —añadió apartando la mirada— es la manera en que hablas tan a la ligera de que una mujer deje a su marido. ¡Cómo se nota que nunca lo has tenido!

—Bueno —dijo Henrietta como si estuviese iniciando un razonamiento—, es algo muy normal en nuestras ciudades del oeste y, al fin y al cabo, es en ellas en las que habremos de fijarnos en el futuro.

Su razonamiento, no obstante, no interesa a esta historia, que tiene otros muchos hilos que desentrañar. Henrietta anunció a Ralph Touchett que estaba lista para abandonar Roma en el tren que él dispusiera, y Ralph decidió que partieran de inmediato. Isabel fue a verlo poco antes de que se marcharan, y él le hizo el mismo comentario que le había hecho Henrietta. Le sorprendía que Isabel se alegrase tanto de librarse de todos ellos. Por toda respuesta, ella puso la mano con suavidad sobre la de él y dijo, en voz baja y con pronta sonrisa:

—¡Mi querido Ralph…!

Era una respuesta más que sobrada, y Ralph se dio por satisfecho. Aun así, siguió hablando en la misma línea jocosa y sincera:

—Te he visto menos de lo que esperaba, pero más vale eso que nada. Y he oído hablar mucho de ti.

—Pues no sé a quién, con la vida que has llevado.

—¡A las voces del aire! A nadie más. Nunca dejo que nadie hable de ti. Siempre dicen que eres «encantadora», y eso es demasiado insulso.

—Desde luego podría haber venido más a verte —dijo Isabel—, pero cuando una está casada tiene muchas obligaciones.

—Por fortuna no estoy casado. Cuando vengas a verme a Inglaterra podré recibirte con toda la libertad de un soltero.

Siguió hablando como si fuese seguro que se volverían a ver, y consiguió que dicha suposición casi pareciese cierta. No hizo ninguna alusión a que se le estuviese acabando el tiempo, a la posibilidad de no sobrevivir al verano. Si él lo prefería así, Isabel estaba dispuesta a respetar su deseo: la realidad ya era lo bastante clara como para erigir postes indicadores a lo largo de su conversación. Eso habría estado bien en los primeros tiempos, aunque sobre esa cuestión, como sobre todos sus demás asuntos, Ralph nunca había sido egoísta. Isabel habló del viaje, de las etapas en que debería dividirlo, de las precauciones que habría de tomar.

—Henrietta es mi mayor precaución —dijo él—. La conciencia de esa mujer es sublime.

—Seguro que será muy concienzuda.

—¿Será? ¡Ya lo ha sido! La única razón por la que viene conmigo es porque piensa que es su deber. Ahí tienes todo un ejemplo del concepto del deber.

—Sí, y uno muy generoso. Hace que me sienta muy avergonzada —dijo Isabel—. Soy yo la que tendría que ir contigo.

—A tu marido no le gustaría nada.

—No, no le gustaría, pero de todas formas yo podría ir.

—Me sorprende lo atrevida que puede ser tu imaginación a veces. ¡Figúrate que yo me convirtiese en motivo de discusión entre una dama y su marido!

—Por eso no voy —dijo Isabel con sencillez, aunque no demasiada lucidez.

Aun así, Ralph la entendió de sobra.

—Ya me imagino, con todas esas obligaciones que dices.

—No se trata de eso. Tengo miedo —dijo Isabel. Tras una pausa lo repitió, como para obligarse a sí misma, más que a él, a oír las palabras—: Tengo miedo.

Ralph apenas pudo discernir lo que significaba su tono de voz; era deliberado de una forma muy extraña, y parecía desprovisto de emoción. ¿Quería hacer penitencia pública por una falta por la que no había sido condenada? ¿O eran sus palabras tan solo un intento de analizarse a sí misma? Fuera lo que fuese, Ralph no pudo resistirse a semejante oportunidad.

—¿Miedo de tu marido?

—¡Miedo de mí misma! —dijo ella levantándose. Permaneció un momento inmóvil y, a continuación, añadió—: Si le tuviera miedo a mi marido, no haría más que cumplir con mi deber. Es lo que se espera de las mujeres.

—Sí, claro —se rió Ralph—, pero para compensar nunca falta el hombre que tenga un miedo espantoso de su mujer.

Isabel no prestó ninguna atención a ese comentario gracioso, y de pronto cambió de tema.

—Con Henrietta al frente de tu pequeña tropa —dijo súbitamente—, el señor Goodwood no tendrá mucho que hacer.

—Mi querida Isabel —contestó Ralph—, él ya está acostumbrado a eso. El señor Goodwood nunca ha tenido nada que hacer.

Ella se sonrojó, y a continuación comentó rápidamente que debía irse. Permanecieron juntos de pie durante un momento, con las manos de Isabel en las de él.

—Tú has sido mi mejor amigo —dijo ella.

—Es por ti por quien quería… por quien quería vivir. Pero ya no te soy de ninguna utilidad.

Entonces ella cayó aún más en la dolorosa cuenta de que no lo volvería a ver. No podía aceptarlo; no podía separarse de él de ese modo.

—Si necesitas que vaya, iré —dijo al fin.

—Tu marido nunca lo consentiría.

—Oh, sí, ya lo arreglaría.

—Entonces me lo reservaré como mi último placer —dijo Ralph.

En respuesta a eso, ella no pudo hacer más que besarle. Era jueves, y esa noche Caspar Goodwood fue al palazzo Roccanera. Fue de los primeros en llegar, y pasó algún tiempo conversando con Gilbert Osmond, que casi siempre estaba presente cuando su esposa recibía a los invitados. Se sentaron juntos, y Osmond, hablador, comunicativo, expansivo, parecía esa noche poseído por una especie de alegría de corte intelectual. Se reclinó en el asiento con las piernas cruzadas y charló a sus anchas, mientras que Goodwood, más inquieto pero en absoluto animado, no dejaba de cambiar de postura, de jugar con el sombrero, de hacer que el pequeño sofá crujiese bajo su peso. El rostro de Osmond presentaba una sonrisa acerada y agresiva; era un hombre cuyas percepciones parecían haberse agudizado al recibir alguna buena noticia. Comentó a Goodwood que lamentaba mucho que fuese a dejarlos, y que él en particular lo echaría de menos. Veía a tan pocos hombres inteligentes… eran sorprendentemente escasos en Roma. Tenía que garantizarle que iba a volver, pues para un italiano inveterado como él había algo muy refrescante en hablar con un auténtico forastero.

—Ya sabe que me gusta mucho Roma —dijo Osmond—, pero aún me gusta más tratar con gente que no padezca esa superstición. Pese a todo, el mundo moderno está bastante bien. Usted, por ejemplo, es muy moderno, y sin embargo nada vulgar. La mayoría de los modernos que vemos son tan poca cosa. Si son los hombres del mañana, haríamos bien en morir jóvenes. Por supuesto, a menudo también los antiguos resultan terriblemente aburridos. A mi esposa y a mí nos gusta lo que sea verdaderamente nuevo, no solo lo que tenga la mera pretensión de serlo. Por desgracia, no hay nada de nuevo en la ignorancia y la estupidez. Mucho de eso puede verse en lo que se nos ofrece como una manifestación del progreso, de la luz… ¡Una manifestación de vulgaridad! Hay cierto tipo de vulgaridad

que creo que sí que es verdaderamente nueva; no creo que haya habido nunca nada así. De hecho, no encuentro vulgaridad alguna en absoluto antes del presente siglo. Se ve alguna leve amenaza aquí y allá en el anterior, pero hoy en día el aire se ha vuelto tan denso que las cosas delicadas literalmente no se reconocen. Pues bien, usted nos gusta… —Dudó un momento al tiempo que ponía la mano con suavidad en la rodilla de Goodwood y le sonreía con una mezcla de azoramiento y confianza—. Le voy a decir algo sumamente ofensivo y condescendiente, pero le ruego que me permita darme el gusto. Usted nos gusta porque… porque nos ha reconciliado un poco con el futuro. Si va a haber cierto número de personas como usted, *à la bonne heure!* Estoy hablando tanto por mi esposa como por mí. Ella habla por mí, mi esposa, así que por qué no habría de hacerlo yo también por ella. Estamos tan unidos como el candelabro y el apagavelas, sabe usted. ¿Es suponer demasiado si le digo que creo, por lo que usted me ha dicho, que sus actividades son, por así decirlo… comerciales? Eso tiene sus peligros, pero lo que más nos impresiona es la forma en que ha conseguido escapar. Perdóneme si este pequeño cumplido le parece de un gusto execrable; menos mal que mi esposa no me oye. Lo que quiero decir es que usted podría haber llegado a convertirse en alguien… bueno, en lo que acabo de mencionar. Todo el mundo estadounidense estaba conspirando para convertirlo a usted en eso. Y, sin embargo, es usted tan moderno… ¡el hombre más moderno que hemos conocido! Siempre estaremos encantados de volver a verlo.

He dicho que Osmond estaba de buen humor, y esos comentarios dan amplia muestra de ello. Eran mucho más personales de lo que aquel solía molestarse en ser y, si Caspar Goodwood hubiera prestado más atención, habría podido llegar a pensar que esa defensa de la delicadeza estaba en manos bastante extrañas. No obstante, podemos suponer que Osmond sabía muy bien lo que pretendía, y que si eligió usar ese tono condescendiente con una ordinariez que no era habitual en él, tendría alguna razón excelente para aventurarse a hacerlo. Goodwood solo tenía la vaga sensación de que Osmond estaba cargando las tintas, pero apenas sabía adónde quería llegar. De hecho, apenas sabía de lo que le estaba hablando. Lo que él quería era quedarse a solas con Isabel, y esa idea resonaba con más fuerza en su mente que la voz perfectamente modulada de su marido. Observaba a Isabel conversando con otras personas y se preguntó cuándo quedaría libre, y si le podría pedir que lo acompañara a otra estancia. A diferencia de Osmond, él no estaba del mejor de los humores. Había un componente de ira apagada en la forma en que se fijaba en todo. Hasta ese momento no había sentido ninguna antipatía personal hacia Osmond; solo había pensado que era una persona muy instruida y cortés, y que respondía más de lo que había supuesto al tipo de persona con que era normal que se casara Isabel Archer. Su anfitrión había cobrado gran ventaja sobre él en la liza en campo abierto, y Goodwood tenía muy desarrollado el concepto de juego limpio como para menospreciarlo por ese motivo. No es que se hubiera decidido a hacerse buena opinión de él, ya que eso habría sido un arrebato de benevolencia sentimental del que Goodwood era del todo incapaz, incluso en los días en que más cerca había estado de reconciliarse con lo que le había pasado. Más bien lo aceptaba como un personaje brillante al que tampoco había que tomarse muy en serio, afectado por un exceso de tiempo libre que le gustaba ocupar en refinadas conversaciones. Pero solo confiaba a medias en Osmond, y no conseguía imaginarse por qué demonios este habría de prodigarse en ninguna clase de refinamiento con él. Sospechaba que era porque le reportaba algún tipo de diversión particular, y contribuía a que tuviese la impresión general de que había cierto elemento de perversidad en su victorioso rival. Sabía sin lugar a dudas que Osmond no podía tener razón alguna para desearle ningún mal, ya que no tenía nada que temer de él. Había conseguido una ventaja suprema y podía permitirse el lujo de ser amable con un hombre que lo había perdido todo. Cierto era que a veces Goodwood le había deseado la muerte con todas sus fuerzas, e incluso le habría gustado matarlo él mismo, pero no había forma de que Osmond pudiese saberlo, pues la práctica había convertido al caballero más joven en todo un experto en el arte de parecer totalmente inasequible a cualquier emoción violenta. Cultivaba dicho arte para engañarse a sí mismo, pero era a los demás a quienes conseguía engañar primero. Sin embargo, los resultados eran a veces muy limitados, y no podía haber mejor prueba de ello que la profunda y silenciosa irritación que invadió su alma cuando oyó a Osmond hablar de los sentimientos de su esposa como si fuera el encargado de responder por ellos.

Eso era lo único a lo que había prestado atención de todo lo que le dijo su anfitrión esa noche. Se había dado cuenta de que Osmond tenía más interés del habitual en dejar constancia de la armonía conyugal que reinaba en el palazzo Roccanera. Se había tomado más molestias que nunca en hablar como si su esposa y él viviesen en dulce comunión, y resultara igual de natural para ambos decir tanto «nosotros» como «yo». En todo eso había cierto propósito que había desconcertado e irritado a nuestro pobre bostoniano, quien solo podía consolarse pensando que las relaciones de la señora Osmond con su marido no eran asunto suyo. Por lo demás, no poseía ninguna prueba de

que su marido hubiese presentado una imagen falsa de ella y, si juzgaba a Isabel por las apariencias, no tenía más remedio que creer que a ella le gustaba su vida. Nunca le había mostrado la menor señal de descontento. La señorita Stackpole le había dicho que Isabel había perdido toda ilusión, pero tanto escribir en los periódicos había vuelto a la señorita Stackpole muy sensacionalista. Le gustaban demasiado las noticias frescas. Además, desde que esta había llegado a Roma se había comportado con mayor prudencia y había dejado de enfocarle con su linterna. Podemos decir, por lo que a Henrietta respectaba, que había actuado así casi en contra de su conciencia. Una vez que había visto la realidad de la situación de Isabel, se había impuesto una justa reserva. Aparte de lo que pudiese hacer para mejorar la vida de su amiga, desde luego la forma más útil de ayudarla no sería exacerbar a sus antiguos enamorados hablándoles de los errores de Isabel. La señorita Stackpole seguía muy interesada en el estado de los sentimientos del señor Goodwood, pero en esos momentos solo lo demostraba enviándole recortes escogidos, humorísticos y de otro tipo, extraídos de diarios estadounidenses que recibía en cada correo y que siempre leía con unas tijeras en la mano. Metía los artículos que recortaba en un sobre dirigido al señor Goodwood, que ella misma dejaba en su hotel. Él nunca le preguntaba nada sobre Isabel: ¿no había recorrido ocho mil kilómetros para ver las cosas por sí mismo? Así pues, el señor Goodwood estaba perfectamente autorizado a pensar que la señora Osmond era infeliz; no obstante, la misma ausencia de autorización a hacerlo operaba en él como un irritante, que aumentaba la dureza con la que, pese a su teoría de que ya había dejado de importarle, debía reconocer que, en lo concerniente a Isabel, el futuro no tenía nada que ofrecerle. Ni siquiera tenía la satisfacción de saber la verdad; al parecer, ni siquiera se podía confiar en que él la respetase en el caso de que Isabel fuese infeliz. Era un caso perdido, imposible, inútil. Isabel se lo había hecho ver claramente con su ingenioso plan para que se fuese de Roma. Él no tenía ninguna objeción a hacer lo que pudiese por su primo, pero le rechinaban los dientes cuando consideraba que, de todos los servicios que ella le habría podido pedir, había elegido ese en concreto. En ningún momento había existido el peligro de que optase por otro que hubiera hecho que él se quedase en Roma.

Esa noche, en lo que pensaba fundamentalmente era en que tendría que dejar a Isabel al día siguiente y no había ganado nada yendo a Roma, salvo el saber que era tan poco querido allí como siempre. No había conseguido enterarse de nada acerca de ella: pues era imperturbable, inescrutable, impenetrable. Sintió que la vieja amargura que tanto había intentado digerir volvía a subirle a la garganta, y supo que hay decepciones que duran toda la vida. Mientras, Osmond seguía hablando; Goodwood tenía la vaga impresión de que estaba volviendo a tratar el tema de la perfecta intimidad que mantenía con su esposa. Sintió por un momento que aquel hombre tenía una especie de imaginación demoníaca, pues era imposible que eligiese un tema de conversación tan inusual sin malicia. Pero, al fin y al cabo, ¿qué más daba que fuese demoníaco o no, o si ella lo amaba o lo odiaba? Podría odiarlo a muerte sin que uno llegara a enterarse nunca.

—Por cierto, viaja usted con Ralph Touchett —dijo Osmond—. Supongo que eso significa que tendrán que ir bastante despacio.

—No lo sé. Haré lo que él quiera.

—Es usted muy complaciente. Le estamos inmensamente agradecidos, permítame que se lo diga, como mi esposa ya le habrá manifestado. Hemos estado pendientes de Touchett todo el invierno, y en más de una ocasión ha parecido que nunca dejaría Roma. No tendría que haber venido; es muy imprudente que la gente viaje en ese estado. Es como una especie de falta de delicadeza. Por nada del mundo dependería yo de Touchett tanto como ha dependido él de… de mi esposa y de mí. Ahora no queda más remedio que otras personas se ocupen de él, y desde luego no todo el mundo es tan generoso como usted.

—No tengo nada más que hacer —dijo Caspar con aspereza.

Osmond lo miró un momento con recelo.

—Debería casarse, y entonces ya vería como tenía mucho que hacer. Aunque es cierto que, en ese caso, no estaría usted disponible para hacer estas obras de caridad.

—¿Le parece que por estar casado está usted muy ocupado? —preguntó el joven de forma mecánica.

—Es que, verá, el estar casado ya es de por sí una ocupación. No siempre es activa; a menudo es pasiva, pero eso requiere incluso más atención. Y luego está el hecho de que mi esposa y yo hacemos muchas cosas juntos. Leemos, estudiamos, tocamos música, caminamos, paseamos en carruaje… incluso hablamos como hacíamos cuando nos conocimos. A día de hoy me sigue encantando conversar con mi esposa. Siga mi consejo y, si alguna vez se aburre, cásese. Puede que su mujer llegue a aburrirle, pero usted nunca se aburrirá a sí mismo. Siempre tendrá algo que decirse, siempre tendrá algo sobre lo que reflexionar.

—No me aburro —dijo Goodwood—. Tengo mucho que decirme y sobre lo que pensar.

—¡Más de lo que dice a los demás! —exclamó Osmond con una risita—. ¿Adónde irá después? Quiero decir después de haber depositado a Touchett en manos de sus cuidadores habituales. Creo que su madre va a regresar finalmente para ocuparse de él. Esa señora es espléndida, con esa forma tan refinada que tiene de desatender sus obligaciones… ¿Tal vez pasará usted el verano en Inglaterra?

—No lo sé. No tengo ningún plan.

—¡Dichoso usted! No suena muy halagüeño, pero es señal de que es usted libre.

—Sin duda, estoy muy libre.

—Entonces espero que lo esté para volver a Roma —dijo Osmond al tiempo que veía a otros invitados entrar en la habitación—. Recuerde que cuando venga contamos con usted.

Goodwood había tenido intención de marcharse temprano, pero la velada transcurrió sin que se le presentase la oportunidad de hablar con Isabel, salvo formando parte de algún grupo. Había algo perverso en esa obstinación de ella por evitarle, y el insaciable rencor de él contribuía a que viera intención donde no parecía haber ninguna. Y lo cierto es que no parecía haber ninguna en absoluto. Ella lo miraba a los ojos con su sonrisa limpia y hospitalaria, con la que casi parecía estar pidiéndole que fuera a ayudarla para dar conversación a algunos de sus invitados. Sin embargo, él se opuso a dicha sugerencia con rígida impaciencia. Deambuló de un lado a otro y esperó; habló con las pocas personas que conocía, las cuales por primera vez encontraron su comportamiento un tanto contradictorio respecto a su propia persona. Resultaba en verdad algo muy impropio de Caspar Goodwood, aunque a menudo él sí que contradecía a los demás. Con frecuencia solía haber música en el palazzo Roccanera, y por lo general muy buena. Al abrigo de la música consiguió contenerse, pero hacia el final, cuando vio que la gente empezaba a irse, se acercó a Isabel y le preguntó en voz baja si podía hablar con ella en otro de los salones, que acababa de asegurarse de que estaba vacío. Ella sonrió como si quisiera complacerle pero le fuera del todo imposible.

—Me temo que no puede ser. Los invitados se están despidiendo, y no puedo ausentarme ahora.

—Entonces esperaré a que se vayan.

Ella vaciló unos instantes.

—¡Ah, eso sería estupendo! —exclamó.

Y esperó, aunque lo tuvo que hacer durante un buen rato. Al final quedaron varias personas que parecían estar clavadas a las alfombras. La condesa Gemini, que, como solía decir, nunca era ella misma hasta medianoche, no daba señales de haberse enterado de que la reunión había terminado, y seguía delante de la chimenea con un pequeño círculo de caballeros, los cuales de vez en cuando estallaban en una risa colectiva. Osmond había desaparecido, pues nunca se despedía de los invitados y, como la condesa estaba ampliando su registro como era su costumbre a esas horas de la noche, Isabel había enviado a Pansy a la cama. Isabel permanecía sentada un tanto apartada; también parecía estar deseando que su cuñada empezase a bajar el tono y permitiera a los últimos rezagados marcharse en paz.

—¿No podemos hablar ahora? —le preguntó Goodwood.

Ella se puso en pie de inmediato con una sonrisa.

—Por supuesto. Vamos a otra parte si quiere.

Y salieron juntos, dejando a la condesa con su pequeño círculo. Después de cruzar el umbral ninguno de los dos habló durante unos instantes. Isabel no se sentó, sino que se quedó de pie en medio de la habitación mientras se abanicaba lentamente, con lo que él consideró la misma elegancia de siempre, y parecía esperar a que él hablara. Ahora que estaba a solas con Isabel, toda la pasión que había intentado sofocar se apoderó de sus sentidos; se le agolpó en los ojos e hizo que todo se nublase a su alrededor. La iluminada y vacía habitación se volvió oscura y borrosa, y a través de aquel convulso velo sintió que ella aguardaba con los ojos brillantes y la boca abierta. Si hubiese podido ver con más claridad, se habría dado cuenta de que la sonrisa de Isabel era impertérrita y un tanto forzada, y de que tenía miedo de lo que estaba viendo en el rostro de él.

—Supongo que quiere despedirse —dijo Isabel.

—Sí, aunque no me guste hacerlo. No quiero marcharme de Roma —contestó él con una sinceridad casi quejumbrosa.

—Ya me lo imagino, pero es un detalle maravilloso por su parte. No tengo palabras para expresar lo bondadoso que me parece usted.

Durante un instante él no dijo nada.

—Con unas palabras como esas me obliga a irme.

—Pero tiene que volver algún día —dijo ella en tono alegre.

—¿Algún día? Querrá decir lo más tarde posible.

—No, no; no quiero decir eso en absoluto.

—¿Qué quiere decir entonces? ¡No la entiendo! Pero dije que me iría y me iré —añadió Goodwood.

—Vuelva cuando quiera —dijo Isabel intentando mostrar cierta ligereza.

—¡Su primo me importa un bledo! —estalló al fin Goodwood.

—¿Era eso lo que quería decirme?

—No, no. No quería decirle nada de eso. Quería preguntarle… —Hizo una pausa, y luego prosiguió—: ¿Qué ha hecho de verdad con su vida? —dijo en tono bajo y rápido. Volvió a detenerse como si esperara respuesta, pero ella no dijo nada, así que continuó—: No la entiendo, ni consigo penetrar en su interior. ¿Qué he de creer, qué es lo que quiere que piense? —Ella siguió sin contestar; solo lo miraba, ya sin fingir que estaba tranquila—. Me dicen que es infeliz, y si de verdad lo es me gustaría saberlo. Para mí significaría mucho. Pero usted misma afirma que es feliz, y en cierto modo la veo tan serena, tan calmada, tan rígida. Ha cambiado por completo. Lo oculta todo, y no he conseguido acercarme a usted.

—Se acerca mucho —dijo Isabel con suavidad, pero en tono de advertencia.

—¡Pero aun así no consigo alcanzarla! Quiero saber la verdad. ¿Va todo bien en su vida?

—Pregunta usted demasiado.

—Sí… siempre he preguntado demasiado. Está claro que no me va a contestar. Nunca lo sabré si puede usted evitarlo. Y además no es asunto mío. —Había hablado haciendo un esfuerzo visible por controlarse, por intentar aportar cierta mesura a un estado mental que no lo permitía. Pero la sensación de que era su última oportunidad, de que la amaba y la había perdido, de que ella lo consideraría un necio dijera lo que dijese, de pronto lo azuzó como un látigo y añadió una intensa vibración a su bajo tono de voz—: Es usted totalmente inescrutable, y eso me hace pensar que tiene algo que ocultar. He dicho que me importa un bledo su primo, pero eso no significa que no lo aprecie. Significa que no me voy con él porque lo aprecie. Me iría con él aunque fuese un imbécil, siempre que usted me lo pidiese. Si me lo pidiese, mañana mismo me iría a Siberia. ¿Por qué quiere que me vaya de aquí? Tiene que haber alguna razón; si fuese tan feliz como pretende, le daría igual. Prefiero saber la verdad de lo que le pasa, aunque sea detestable, que haber venido para nada. No vine para eso. Creía que no me importaba. Vine porque quería asegurarme de que ya no hacía falta que pensara más en usted. Pero no he podido pensar en otra cosa, así que tiene usted razón al querer que me vaya. Aun así, ya que he de irme, no habrá nada de malo en que me sincere con usted aunque sea solo por esta vez, ¿no? Si está herida, si él la hiere, nada de lo que yo diga podrá herirla. Sencillamente vine para decirle que la quiero. Creía que era por otro motivo, pero era por eso. No se lo diría si no supiera que no iba a volver a verla. Pero es la última vez… ¡déjeme que arranque una única flor! Ya sé que no tengo derecho a decir esto, ni usted tiene por qué escucharme. Pero no me escucha, nunca escucha; siempre está pensando en otra cosa. Después de esto no tengo más remedio que irme, por supuesto; así que, al menos, ya tengo una razón para hacerlo. El que usted me lo pida no es razón suficiente, no es una razón verdadera. No puedo juzgar a su marido —continuó de forma irrelevante y casi incoherente—, ya que no le entiendo. Él dice que se adoran. ¿Por qué me dice eso a mí? ¿Acaso es asunto mío? Cuando le digo esto a usted, pone una expresión muy extraña. Claro que su expresión siempre es muy extraña. Sí, me oculta algo. No es asunto mío… cierto. Pero yo la amo —dijo Caspar Goodwood.

Mientras él decía todo eso, Isabel tenía ciertamente una expresión extraña. Desvió la mirada hacia la puerta por la que habían entrado y levantó el abanico como en señal de advertencia.

—Se ha portado muy bien; no lo estropee ahora —dijo en voz muy baja.

—No me oye nadie. Es increíble que intente disuadirme así. La amo como nunca la he amado.

—Ya lo sé. Lo supe en cuanto aceptó irse.

—No puede evitarlo… está claro que no puede. Lo haría si pudiese, pero lamentablemente no puede. Lamentablemente para mí, quiero decir. No le pido nada… esto es, nada que no deba. Pero sí que le pido una única satisfacción: que me diga… que me diga…

—¿Que le diga qué?

—Si puedo compadecerla.

—¿Eso le gustaría? —preguntó Isabel, intentando sonreír de nuevo.

—¿Compadecerla? ¡Por supuesto! Al menos sería hacer algo. Dedicaría mi vida entera a hacerlo.

Ella se llevó el abanico al rostro, cubriéndoselo por completo a excepción de los ojos, que se posaron durante un instante en los de él.

—No le dedique su vida entera, pero piense en ello de vez en cuando.

Y tras estas palabras, regresó con la condesa Gemini.

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Madame Merle no se había presentado en el palazzo Roccanera esa velada del jueves cuyas incidencias acabo de narrar, e Isabel, aunque se percató de su ausencia, tampoco se sorprendió. Habían pasado algunas cosas entre ambas que no habían sido precisamente un estímulo a la sociabilidad, y para entenderlas hemos de echar la vista un poco atrás. Ya hemos mencionado que madame Merle regresó de Nápoles poco después de que lord Warburton se marchara de Roma, y que, en su primer encuentro con Isabel (a la que, para ser justos, hemos de decir que fue enseguida a ver), lo primero que quiso fue averiguar el paradero de aquel noble, del que parecía responsabilizar a su querida amiga.

—No me hables de él, por favor —dijo Isabel por respuesta—. Ya hemos oído bastante de él últimamente.

Madame Merle ladeó un poco la cabeza en señal de protesta y sonrió con la comisura izquierda de la boca.

—Tú has oído de él, sí, pero recuerda que yo en Nápoles no. Esperaba encontrarlo aquí y poder felicitar a Pansy.

—Todavía puedes felicitar a Pansy si quieres, pero no porque se vaya a casar con lord Warburton.

—¡Cómo me dices eso! ¿Es que no sabes que había puesto todo mi empeño? —preguntó madame Merle con cierta vehemencia, aunque sin perder el tono de buen humor.

Isabel se descompuso, pero estaba decidida a mantener también el buen humor.

—Pues no deberías haberte ido a Nápoles. Deberías haberte quedado aquí para ver cómo se desarrollaba el asunto.

—Confiaba en ti. Pero ¿crees que será ya demasiado tarde?

—Eso pregúntaselo a Pansy —dijo Isabel.

—Lo que le voy a preguntar es qué le dijiste tú.

Esas palabras parecían justificar el impulso de defenderse que surgió en Isabel al percatarse de la actitud crítica de su visitante. Como sabemos, hasta ese momento madame Merle había sido muy discreta; nunca había criticado, y había mantenido una actitud excesivamente temerosa de entrometerse. Pero al parecer solo había estado reservándose para esa ocasión, a juzgar por la expresión viva y peligrosa de su mirada y por el aire de irritación que ni siquiera su admirable compostura era capaz de disimular. Madame Merle se había llevado una decepción que sorprendía a Isabel, ya que nuestra heroína no tenía la menor idea del ferviente interés de la dama en el matrimonio de Pansy, y que reveló de un modo que suscitó la alarma de la señora Osmond. Con más claridad que nunca Isabel oyó una voz fría y burlona, procedente de no sabía dónde y resonando en el oscuro vacío que la rodeaba, que afirmaba que aquella mujer brillante, fuerte, firme y sofisticada, aquella encarnación de lo práctico, de lo personal, de lo inmediato, era un poderoso agente de su destino. Estaba más cerca de ella de lo que Isabel había descubierto aún, y su cercanía no era el agradable accidente que había supuesto durante tanto tiempo. De hecho, la impresión de que fuera un accidente había muerto en su interior aquel día en que, de forma casual, había sorprendido en inusual intimidad a aquella extraordinaria dama y a su marido, sentados juntos en privado. Ninguna sospecha concreta había ocupado su lugar aún, pero bastaba para que viera a esa amiga con otros ojos, para que llegase a la conclusión de que había más intenciones ocultas en su conducta pasada de las que le habían parecido en su momento. Sí, había alguna intención, la había, se dijo Isabel, que creyó despertar de un largo y pernicioso sueño. ¿Qué fue lo que le llevó a pensar que las intenciones de madame Merle podrían no haber sido buenas? Nada, salvo la desconfianza que había ido creciendo en ella de un tiempo a esa parte, y que en esos momentos se unió al profundo asombro que le produjo el desafío de su visitante por la causa de la pobre Pansy. Había algo en ese desafío que ya desde el principio despertó en Isabel un gran recelo: una vitalidad indescriptible que esta nunca antes había percibido en las demostraciones de delicadeza y prudencia de su amiga. Madame Merle no había querido interferir, sin duda, pero solo mientras no hubiese nada en lo que interferir. Podría parecer al lector que Isabel se precipitó a la hora de dudar, basándose únicamente en meras sospechas de una sinceridad que varios años de buenos oficios parecían demostrar. Sin duda actuó con celeridad, pero tenía sus razones para ello, ya que una extraña verdad estaba tomando cuerpo en su interior: los intereses de madame Merle eran idénticos a los de Osmond, y eso era más que suficiente para ella.

—No creo que Pansy te cuente nada que te pueda enojar aún más —dijo Isabel en respuesta al último comentario de su interlocutora.

—No estoy enojada en absoluto. Solo tengo mucho interés en que las cosas se arreglen. ¿Crees que Warburton nos ha dejado para siempre?

—No te sabría decir, y tampoco te entiendo. Ya ha terminado todo, así que, por favor, déjalo estar. Osmond ya me ha hablado mucho del tema, y no me queda nada más que decir ni oír. Estoy segura —añadió Isabel— de que él estará encantado de hablarlo contigo.

—Ya sé lo que piensa al respecto. Vino a verme ayer por la tarde.

—¿En cuanto llegaste? Entonces ya estás al tanto de todo, y no necesitas acudir a mí en busca de información.

—No es información lo que quiero. Lo que quiero, en el fondo, es entender. Tenía tantas ganas de que se produjera ese matrimonio. La mera idea del mismo conseguía lo que muy pocas cosas consiguen: complacer a mi imaginación.

—Sí, a la tuya, pero no a las de las personas implicadas.

—Con lo cual quieres decir que no es asunto mío. Por supuesto que no lo es, directamente. Pero cuando se es una vieja amiga no se puede evitar que te afecte también. Pareces olvidar el tiempo que hace que conozco a Pansy. También quieres decir, claro está —añadió madame Merle—, que tú sí eres una de las personas implicadas.

—No, eso es lo último que se me ocurriría pensar. Estoy muy harta de todo este asunto.

Madame Merle vaciló un instante.

—Sí, claro, ya has hecho lo que tenías que hacer.

—Ten cuidado con lo que dices —dijo Isabel muy seria.

—Oh, lo tengo; tal vez cuando tengo más cuidado sea cuando menos lo aparento. Tu marido te juzga con mucha severidad.

Isabel no contestó nada durante unos momentos, su voz ahogada por la amargura. Lo que más la afectaba no era la insolencia de madame Merle al comunicarle que Osmond le había hecho confidencias en contra de ella, pues tampoco creía mucho que la otra hubiese pretendido ser insolente. Madame Merle rara vez lo era, y solo cuando tenía toda la razón para serlo. No la tenía en esos momentos, o al menos aún no. Lo que afectó a Isabel como una gota de ácido corrosivo sobre una herida abierta fue saber que Osmond no solo la desacreditaba de pensamiento, sino también de palabra.

—¿Quieres saber cómo lo juzgo yo a él? —preguntó al fin.

—No, porque tampoco me lo dirías. Y me apenaría mucho saberlo.

Se hizo una pausa, y, por primera vez desde que la conocía, Isabel pensó que madame Merle era una persona desagradable y deseó que se marchara.

—Recuerda lo atractiva que es Pansy, y no desesperes —dijo de pronto con la esperanza de que eso pusiera punto final a la conversación. Sin embargo, la avasalladora presencia de madame Merle no sufrió alteración alguna. Tan solo se arregló el echarpe sobre los hombros y, con el movimiento, esparció por el aire una tenue y agradable fragancia.

—No desespero; me siento con más ánimos. Y no he venido a reprenderte, solo a enterarme de la verdad, si es posible. Y sé que me la dirás si te lo pido. Es una enorme bendición tener la seguridad de poder contar siempre con ello. Ni te imaginas lo mucho que me reconforta eso.

—¿De qué verdad hablas? —preguntó Isabel intrigada.

—De si lord Warburton cambió de idea por iniciativa propia o porque tú se lo aconsejaste. Es decir, si fue porque él quiso o porque quisiste tú. Figúrate la confianza que todavía te tengo, pese a haber perdido una poca —dijo madame Merle con una sonrisa—, para hacerte una pregunta así. —Miró a su amiga para juzgar el efecto de sus palabras, y continuó—: No te pongas tremendista, ni intransigente, ni te ofendas. Creo que te estoy honrando al hablarte así. No lo haría con ninguna otra mujer, como tampoco conozco a ninguna otra que me dijera la verdad. ¿Y no ves lo bueno que sería que tu marido lo supiera? Cierto es que no parece haber tenido ningún tacto para enterarse, y ha preferido regodearse con suposiciones infundadas. Pero eso no altera el hecho de que, si supiera con claridad lo que en realidad ha pasado, su perspectiva con respecto a los planes que tiene para su hija cambiaría. Pero si lord Warburton sencillamente se cansó de la pobre niña, eso es así, y es una pena. Si la dejó para complacerte a ti, eso ya es otro cantar. También es una pena, pero de otro tipo. En este último caso, lo mejor hubiera sido resignarte a no ser complacida… y ver a tu hijastra casada. ¡Deja estar a lord Warburton, y deja que sea nuestro!

Madame Merle había procedido de forma muy deliberada, observando a su interlocutora y considerando al parecer que podía seguir hablando tranquilamente. Conforme lo hacía, Isabel había ido palideciendo y apretándose las manos con más fuerza en el regazo. No se trataba de que su visitante hubiese decidido que por fin había llegado el momento

de ser insolente, no parecía ser esa su intención. Se trataba de un horror aún peor.

—¿Quién eres… qué eres? —murmuró Isabel—. ¿Qué tienes que ver con mi marido?

Era extraño que en esos momentos se sintiese tan unida a él como si lo amara.

—¡Vaya, te lo tomas a la tremenda! Lo siento mucho, pero no esperes que lo haga yo también.

—¿Qué tienes que ver conmigo? —continuó Isabel.

Madame Merle se levantó lentamente, acariciándose el manguito, pero sin apartar la mirada de la de Isabel.

—¡Todo! —contestó.

Isabel se quedó mirándola, sin levantarse. Su rostro era casi como una plegaria para encontrar iluminación. Pero la luz que emanaba de los ojos de esa mujer parecía ser solo oscuridad.

—¡Oh, qué horror! —murmuró al fin.

Se echó hacia atrás y se cubrió el rostro con las manos. De pronto le había sobrevenido, como una gigantesca ola, la idea de que la señora Touchett tenía razón. Su matrimonio había sido obra de madame Merle. Antes de que se apartara las manos del rostro, la dama ya se había marchado de la habitación.

Esa tarde Isabel salió sola a pasear. Quería irse muy lejos, bajo el cielo, a donde pudiera bajar del carruaje y caminar entre las margaritas. Hacía tiempo que la vieja Roma se había convertido en su confidente, pues, en un mundo en ruinas, la ruina de su felicidad parecía una catástrofe menos incoherente. Reposaba su cansancio sobre cosas que se habían desmoronado hacía siglos y, sin embargo, seguían en pie; vertía su secreta tristeza en el silencio de lugares solitarios, donde se resaltaba y contemporizaba el carácter moderno de su aflicción, de manera que, mientras estaba sentada en un rincón calentado por el sol un día de invierno, o de pie en una iglesia mohosa a la que no iba nadie, casi podía sonreír al pensar en su insignificancia. Su tristeza era insignificante comparada con la inmensidad de la historia romana, y su obsesiva noción de la continuidad del destino humano la transportaba sin dificultad de lo pequeño a lo grande. Había entablado una íntima y tierna relación con Roma, la cual se fundía con sus emociones y las templaba. Pero sobre todo pensaba en ella como el lugar donde tanta gente había sufrido. Eso era lo que le venía a la mente en las desvencijadas iglesias, cuyas columnas de mármol, traídas de ruinas paganas, parecían ofrecerle compañía para soportar su sino, y el rancio incienso parecía estar formado por oraciones largo tiempo desatendidas. No había hereje menos coherente ni más agradecida que Isabel; ni el más ferviente de los fieles, al contemplar las oscuras pinturas de los altares o los grupos de velas, habría sentido de forma tan íntima todo lo que le sugerían a ella esos objetos, ni habría sido tan proclive en esos momentos a tener una revelación espiritual. Como sabemos, Pansy casi siempre la acompañaba, y últimamente la condesa Gemini, balanceando una sombrilla rosa, había prestado brillo a la comitiva; aun así, de vez en cuando le gustaba quedarse sola en el lugar que mejor conviniera a su estado de ánimo. Para tales ocasiones tenía varios refugios; quizá el más accesible de todos fuera un asiento en el parapeto bajo que bordea el ancho terreno cubierto de hierba que hay delante de la alta y fría fachada de San Juan de Letrán, desde donde se puede contemplar al fondo de la Campania la lejana silueta del monte Albano, así como la imponente llanura que sigue tan llena de todo lo que se ha esfumado en ella. Tras la partida de su primo y de sus acompañantes, Isabel comenzó a dar aquellos paseos melancólicos con más frecuencia, llevando su espíritu sombrío de un lugar sagrado a otro. Incluso cuando Pansy y la condesa estaban con ella, sentía la presencia de un mundo desaparecido. El carruaje, después de dejar atrás los muros de Roma, rodaba por estrechos senderos en los que la madreselva había comenzado a enredarse en los setos, o la esperaba en lugares tranquilos cerca de los campos, mientras ella se alejaba para pasear entre la hierba salpicada de flores, o se sentaba sobre una piedra que antaño tuvo alguna utilidad y contemplaba a través del velo de su tristeza personal la espléndida tristeza del escenario: la densa y cálida luz, las lejanas gradaciones cromáticas y los colores confundiéndose suavemente, los pastores inmóviles en poses solitarias, las colinas sobre las que las sombras de las nubes tenían la levedad de un rubor.

La tarde de la que he empezado a hablar Isabel tomó la decisión de no pensar en madame Merle, pero dicha decisión demostró ser inútil, pues la imagen de esa dama la rondaba constantemente. Se preguntó, sintiendo un terror casi infantil ante tal suposición, si se podía aplicar a esa amiga íntima desde hacía varios años el gran epíteto histórico de «malvada». Solo conocía el concepto a través de la Biblia y de otras obras literarias; que ella supiera, nunca había tenido contacto personal alguno con la maldad. Siempre había querido conocer a fondo la vida humana y, pese a que se vanagloriaba de haberla cultivado con cierto éxito, ese privilegio elemental le había sido negado. Quizá, en el sentido histórico, ser malvado no significara ser falso, por muy falso que se fuera; pues eso es lo que había sido madame Merle: profundamente falsa. La tía Lydia había hecho ese descubrimiento mucho tiempo atrás, y se lo había mencionado a su sobrina; pero Isabel había pensado entonces que poseía una visión mucho más rica de las

cosas, sobre todo de la espontaneidad de su propio desarrollo y de la nobleza de sus propias interpretaciones, que la pobre señora Touchett y sus encorsetados razonamientos. Madame Merle había hecho lo que quería: había conseguido la unión de sus dos amigos, aunque no dejaba de ser muy sorprendente que hubiese deseado tanto que tal hecho ocurriera. Había personas que sentían una gran pasión por ser casamenteras, como los devotos del arte la sienten por el arte, pero madame Merle, aún siendo una gran artista, no era una de ellas. Tenía demasiada mala opinión del matrimonio, e incluso de la vida; había querido que se produjese ese matrimonio en particular, pero no otros. Por lo tanto, lo había hecho con la intención de ganar algo, e Isabel se preguntó qué beneficio habría sacado. Como es natural, tardó bastante tiempo en descubrirlo, e incluso entonces fue un descubrimiento imperfecto. Cayó en la cuenta de que madame Merle, aunque había parecido cogerle mucha simpatía desde su primer encuentro en Gardencourt, había sido mucho más afectuosa con ella tras la muerte del señor Touchett, y después de enterarse de que su joven amiga había sido objeto de la generosidad del anciano. Su beneficio no había consistido en el vulgar recurso de pedir dinero prestado, sino en la idea más refinada de presentar a uno de sus amigos íntimos a esa joven fresca e ingenua poseedora de una fortuna. Naturalmente, había elegido a su amigo más íntimo, y a esas alturas Isabel ya tenía muy claro que ese puesto lo ocupaba Gilbert. De ese modo llegó a la convicción de que el hombre que había creído que era el menos sórdido del mundo se había casado con ella, como un vulgar aventurero, por su dinero. Por extraño que resulte, nunca antes se le había ocurrido; pese a todo lo malo que había pensado de Osmond, no le había atribuido esa injuria en particular. Era lo peor que podía pensar de él, después de haber estado tanto tiempo diciéndose que lo peor estaba aún por llegar. Tampoco pasaba nada porque un hombre se casase con una mujer por su dinero; era algo que sucedía a menudo, pero al menos podía hacérselo saber. Se preguntó si, ya que lo que quería era su dinero, le bastaría con quedárselo. ¿Aceptaría simplemente tomarlo y dejarla ir? Si el gran acto de generosidad realizado por el señor Touchett pudiera servirle de ayuda en esos momentos, sería una gran bendición. No tardó en ocurrírsele que, si madame Merle había querido prestar un servicio a Gilbert, el agradecimiento de este por dicho favor ya debía de haberse enfriado bastante. ¿Cuáles serían sus sentimientos en esos momentos con respecto a su demasiado ferviente benefactora, y qué expresión habrían adoptado en semejante maestro de la ironía? Es un hecho singular, aunque no por ello menos característico, que antes de que Isabel regresara de su silencioso paseo rompiese dicho silencio exclamando en voz baja:

—¡Pobre madame Merle!

Su compasión podría haber estado justificada si esa misma tarde Isabel hubiera estado oculta tras una de las valiosas cortinas de damasco tamizadas por el tiempo que vestían el pequeño e interesante salón de la dama en cuestión; es decir, en aquella estancia decorada con sumo detalle a la que ya hicimos una visita en compañía del discreto señor Rosier. Hacia las seis, Gilbert Osmond estaba sentado en dicho salón, mientras que su anfitriona se hallaba de pie delante de él, tal y como Isabel la había visto en la ocasión mencionada en esta historia con el énfasis que le corresponde, no tanto por su importancia aparente como por la real.

—No me creo que seas infeliz; creo que te gusta —decía madame Merle.

—¿Cuándo he dicho yo que sea infeliz? —preguntó Osmond, con una expresión lo bastante seria como para sugerir que de hecho podría serlo.

—No, pero tampoco dices lo contrario, como deberías por simple gratitud.

—No me hables de gratitud —replicó él con aspereza—. Y no me exasperes —añadió al momento.

Madame Merle se sentó lentamente, con los brazos cruzados y sus blancas manos dispuestas una sujetando un brazo y la otra, por así decirlo, adornando el otro. Parecía exquisitamente tranquila, pero a la vez terriblemente triste.

—Por tu parte, no intentes asustarme. Me pregunto si adivinas algunos de mis pensamientos.

—Intento preocuparme por ellos lo menos posible. Ya tengo bastante con los míos.

—Eso es porque son deliciosos.

Osmond apoyó la cabeza contra el respaldo del sillón y miró a su acompañante de una forma directa y cínica, que en parte parecía también una expresión de fatiga.

—Me estás exasperando —comentó al momento—, y estoy muy cansado.

—*Eh moi donc!* —exclamó madame Merle.

—En tu caso es porque te fatigas tú misma. En el mío, no es por mi culpa.

—Si me fatigo es por ti. Te he dado algo por lo que interesarte, y eso es un gran regalo.

—¿A eso lo llamas algo por lo que interesarme? —preguntó Osmond con indiferencia.

—Por supuesto, ya que te ayuda a estar entretenido todo el tiempo.

—Nunca me ha parecido que el tiempo transcurra más lento como este invierno.

—Nunca has tenido mejor aspecto. Nunca has estado tan agradable y brillante.

—¡Al infierno con mi brillantez! —murmuró él en tono reflexivo—. ¡Qué poco me conoces, después de todo!

—Si no te conozco a ti, entonces no conozco a nadie —sonrió madame Merle—. Tienes una sensación de triunfo absoluto.

—No, no la tendré hasta que consiga que dejes de juzgarme.

—Dejé de hacerlo hace mucho. Hablo de los viejos tiempos. Aunque ahora también te muestras más expresivo.

Osmond intentó contenerse.

—Ojalá tú te mostraras menos.

—¿Quieres condenarme al silencio? Recuerda que nunca he sido una charlatana. De todas formas, hay tres o cuatro cosas que querría decirte antes. Tu esposa no sabe qué hacer —añadió cambiando de tono.

—Perdona, pero lo sabe perfectamente. Se ha trazado una línea de actuación muy clara y tiene intención de llevar a cabo sus ideas.

—En estos momentos sus ideas deben de ser ciertamente extraordinarias.

—Ya lo creo que lo son. Y tiene sin duda más que nunca.

—Sin embargo, esta mañana ha sido incapaz de mostrarme ninguna —dijo madame Merle—. Parecía hallarse en un estado mental de gran simplicidad, casi de estupidez. Estaba completamente desconcertada.

—¿Por qué no dices directamente que resultaba patética?

—Ah, no, no quiero darte tantas alas.

Él todavía tenía la cabeza reclinada en el cojín de detrás, y el tobillo de un pie apoyado sobre la otra rodilla. Permaneció así durante un rato.

—Me gustaría saber qué es lo que te pasa —dijo al fin.

—¿Que qué me pasa? —Y entonces madame Merle se detuvo, para seguir a continuación con un repentino estallido de emoción, como una explosión de truenos veraniegos en un cielo despejado—: ¡Lo que me pasa es que daría la mano derecha por poder llorar, pero no puedo!

—¿Y de qué te serviría llorar?

—Me haría sentirme como me sentía antes de conocerte.

—Si he secado tus lágrimas, eso ya es algo. Aunque también te he visto derramarlas.

—Oh, creo que aún me harás llorar más. Mejor dicho, me harás aullar como un lobo. Es lo que más deseo y necesito. He sido muy vil esta mañana, me he portado de una forma horrible.

—Si Isabel estaba en ese estado de estupidez que dices, probablemente ni se habrá dado cuenta —dijo Osmond.

—Ha sido precisamente mi maldad lo que la ha dejado estupefacta. No lo he podido evitar; estaba poseída por algo maligno. O quizá fuera algo bueno, no lo sé. No solo me has secado las lágrimas: también me has secado el alma.

—Entonces no soy yo el responsable del estado de mi esposa —dijo él—. Resulta agradable pensar que me voy a beneficiar de tu influencia sobre ella. ¿No sabes que el alma es un principio inmortal? ¿Cómo puede sufrir ninguna alteración?

—No creo en absoluto que sea un principio inmortal. Creo que se puede destruir sin problemas. Eso es lo que le ha pasado a la mía, que en un principio era muy buena pero ha acabado destruida, y es a ti a quien se lo debo. Eres una mala persona —añadió con mucho énfasis.

—¿Es así como vamos a terminar? —preguntó Osmond con la misma frialdad estudiada.

—No sé cómo terminaremos. Ojalá lo supiera. ¿Cómo terminan las malas personas, sobre todo cuando cometen sus delitos juntos? Me has vuelto tan mala como tú.

—No te entiendo. A mí me parece que eres bastante buena —replicó Osmond, cuya fingida indiferencia dio gran efecto a sus palabras.

La serenidad de madame Merle, por el contrario, parecía ir disminuyendo, y estaba más cerca de perderla que en cualquier otra ocasión en que hemos tenido el placer de verla. El brillo de sus ojos se tornó sombrío, y su sonrisa delataba el doloroso esfuerzo que le costaba mantenerla.

—¿Bastante buena pese a todo lo que he hecho de mí misma? Supongo que es a eso a lo que te refieres.

—¡Bastante buena para seguir siendo siempre tan encantadora! —dijo Osmond sonriendo también.

—¡Ay, Dios mío! —murmuró ella; y allí sentada, en toda su madura lozanía, recurrió al gesto que ella misma había

provocado en Isabel esa mañana: inclinó la cabeza y se cubrió el rostro con las manos.

—¿Al fin vas a llorar? —preguntó Osmond; y como ella permaneció inmóvil, prosiguió—: ¿Me he quejado a ti alguna vez?

Madame Merle bajó las manos rápidamente.

—No, te has vengado de otro modo. Te has vengado en ella.

Osmond echó la cabeza aún más hacia atrás. Durante un rato miró al techo como si estuviese suplicando, de un modo nada ceremonioso, a los poderes celestiales.

—¡Ay, cómo es la imaginación de las mujeres! En el fondo es muy vulgar. Hablas de venganza como una novelista de tercera.

—Claro que no te has quejado. Has disfrutado mucho de tu triunfo.

—Tengo bastante curiosidad por saber a qué llamas mi triunfo.

—Has conseguido que tu esposa te tenga miedo.

Osmond cambió de postura. Se inclinó hacia delante, apoyó los codos en las rodillas y observó durante un momento la hermosa y antigua alfombra persa a sus pies. Tenía el aire de quien se niega a aceptar valoraciones de nadie, ni siquiera acerca del tiempo, y de preferir atenerse a las suyas propias. Era una peculiaridad que en ciertos momentos lo convertía en una persona muy irritante a la hora de conversar con él.

—Isabel no me tiene miedo, y tampoco es lo que busco —dijo al fin—. ¿Adónde quieres ir a parar cuando me provocas diciendo cosas así?

—He estado pensando en todo el daño que podrías hacerme —contestó madame Merle—. Esta mañana tu esposa me tenía miedo a mí, pero en realidad era a ti a quien temía a través de mí.

—Puede que hayas dicho cosas de muy mal gusto, y de eso no soy yo responsable. Y no entiendo en absoluto para qué tenías que ir a verla: tú eres muy capaz de actuar sin ella. Por lo que yo veo, no he conseguido que tú me tengas miedo —continuó—, así que no veo por qué debería tenérmelo ella. Ambas sois cuando menos igual de valientes. No sé de dónde has sacado todas esas sandeces; era de esperar que a estas alturas ya me conocieras. —Mientras hablaba se levantó y se acercó a la chimenea, donde se quedó un momento contemplando, como si los viera por primera vez, los delicados ejemplares de valiosa porcelana que en ella había. Cogió una pequeña taza y la sostuvo en la mano; todavía sosteniéndola, con el brazo apoyado en la repisa, continuó—: Siempre ves demasiado en todo. Te excedes y pierdes contacto con la realidad. Soy mucho más simple de lo que crees.

—Creo que eres muy simple —dijo madame Merle, con la mirada fija en la taza—. Con el tiempo me he ido dando cuenta. Como decía, te juzgué hace mucho, pero solo he empezado a comprenderte a partir de tu matrimonio. Ahora he visto mucho mejor lo que has sido para tu esposa que lo que fuiste para mí. Por favor, ten cuidado con ese objeto, es muy valioso.

—Ya tiene una rajadura muy pequeña —dijo Osmond con sequedad mientras lo dejaba en su sitio—. Si no me comprendías antes de casarme, fue muy cruel y precipitado por tu parte meterme en una situación tan delicada. Aun así, he de reconocer que le cogí el gusto, ya que creí que sería un refugio agradable. Tampoco es que yo pidiera mucho; tan solo que ella me quisiera.

—¡Que te quisiera tantísimo!

—Tantísimo, por supuesto. En un caso así, uno pide el máximo. Que me adorara, si lo prefieres. Sí, eso es lo que quería.

—Yo nunca te adoré —dijo madame Merle.

—¡Pero lo fingías!

—Lo cierto es que a mí nunca me acusaste de ser un refugio agradable —continuó ella.

—Mi esposa se ha negado… se ha negado a ser nada por el estilo —dijo Osmond—. Tú estarás empeñada en hacer un drama de esto, pero para ella desde luego no es ninguna tragedia.

—¡La tragedia es para mí! —exclamó madame Merle, que se levantó lanzando un largo y profundo suspiro, pero al mismo tiempo observando el contenido de la repisa de la chimenea—. Parece que me ha tocado aprender a fuerza de gran sufrimiento las desventajas de ocupar una posición falsa.

—Te expresas como una frase de un cuaderno de caligrafía. Tenemos que buscar nuestro solaz donde podamos encontrarlo. Si mi esposa no me quiere, al menos mi hija sí. Buscaré las compensaciones en Pansy. Afortunadamente, no tengo una sola queja de ella.

—¡Ah, si yo tuviera un hijo…! —dijo ella en voz baja.

Osmond esperó, y después, con aire algo más formal, proclamó:

—Los hijos de los demás pueden sernos de gran interés.

—Tú sí que pareces un cuaderno de caligrafía. Después de todo, hay algo que nos une.

—¿La idea del mal que puedo hacerte? —preguntó Osmond.

—No, la idea del bien que puedo hacerte yo. Eso es lo que hizo que me pusiera tan celosa de Isabel. Quiero que sea obra mía —añadió madame Merle mientras su expresión, que se había vuelto dura y amargada, se relajaba hasta alcanzar su habitual placidez.

Su amigo cogió el sombrero y el paraguas y, tras dar al primero dos o tres golpes con el puño del abrigo, dijo:

—Con todo, creo que es mejor que me lo dejes a mí.

Cuando se hubo ido, lo primero que hizo madame Merle fue acercarse a la repisa de la chimenea y coger la devaluada taza de café en la que Osmond había mencionado la existencia de una rajadura, pero la miró sin prestarle atención.

—¿He sido tan vil para nada? —gimió débilmente.

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Como la condesa Gemini estaba muy poco familiarizada con los monumentos clásicos, Isabel se ofreció a llevarla de vez en cuando a ver esas interesantes reliquias y conferir a sus paseos vespertinos un cierto carácter de estudio de la Antigüedad. La condesa, que afirmaba considerar a su cuñada un prodigio de erudición, no puso ninguna objeción, y contemplaba las imponentes obras de enladrillado romano con tanta paciencia como si hubieran sido montones de telas modernas. Carecía de sentido de lo histórico, aunque sí poseía para algunos temas el gusto por lo anecdótico y, por lo que a ella respectaba, el de la voluntad de sacrificio, pero estaba tan encantada de encontrarse en Roma que estaba dispuesta a dejarse llevar. Con gusto habría pasado una hora todos los días en la húmeda oscuridad de las Termas de Tito si hubiese sido condición indispensable para que se quedase en el palazzo Roccanera. No obstante, Isabel no era una cicerone muy estricta; visitaba las ruinas fundamentalmente porque le ofrecían una excusa para hablar de otros temas que no fueran los amoríos de las damas de Florencia, sobre los que su acompañante nunca se cansaba de proporcionarle abundante información. Hemos de añadir que, durante esas visitas, la condesa se abstenía de abordar cualquier forma de investigación activa; prefería quedarse sentada en el carruaje y exclamar que todo era muy interesante. Era de ese modo como hasta ese momento había explorado el Coliseo, para gran pesar de su sobrina, la cual, con todo el debido respeto a su tía, no acababa de entender por qué esta no podía bajarse del vehículo para acceder al interior del monumento. Pansy tenía tan pocas oportunidades de recorrer a sus anchas aquellos lugares que su punto de vista no era del todo desinteresado; resulta fácil adivinar que albergaba la secreta esperanza de que, una vez dentro, podría convencer a la invitada de sus padres para que subieran hasta las gradas superiores. Llegó el día en que la condesa anunció su disposición a emprender dicha hazaña; fue durante una de esas suaves tardes de marzo en las que ese mes ventoso se manifiesta con ocasionales ráfagas de brisa primaveral. Las tres damas entraron juntas en el Coliseo, pero Isabel dejó a sus acompañantes para vagar a solas por el lugar. Había ascendido a menudo a esas desoladas gradas desde las que las multitudes romanas bramaban enfervorecidas, y en las que ahora brotan flores silvestres (cuando las dejan) entre las profundas grietas. Ese día se sentía fatigada, y tenía ganas de sentarse en el devastado anfiteatro. Representaba también un alivio, pues con frecuencia la condesa exigía más atención de la que ella daba a cambio, e Isabel pensaba que, cuando estaba a solas con su sobrina, la condesa dejaba que el polvo se acumulara durante un rato sobre los antiguos escándalos de las riberas del Arno. Así pues, Isabel, se quedó abajo mientras Pansy guiaba a su atolondrada tía hasta la empinada escalera de ladrillo, a los pies de la cual el guardián abre la alta verja de madera. El enorme recinto estaba parcialmente sumido en la penumbra; el sol de poniente destacaba el tono rojo pálido de los grandes bloques de travertino… un color latente que parece ser el único elemento vivo de esas inmensas ruinas. Aquí y allá se veía pasar a algún campesino o turista mirando al lejano horizonte en el que, en aquella despejada calma, una multitud de golondrinas volaban incesantemente en círculos o se lanzaban en picado. Isabel se dio cuenta entonces de que otro de los visitantes, parado en medio de la arena, había reparado en su persona y la estaba mirando con una leve inclinación de cabeza que, solo unas semanas antes, la dama había observado como característica de alguien provisto de una intención dubitativa pero indestructible. Tal actitud, ese día, solo podía pertenecer al señor Edward Rosier y, en efecto, al momento dicho caballero demostró que estaba considerando la posibilidad de hablar con ella. Cuando se hubo asegurado de que Isabel no estaba acompañada, se acercó y le dijo que, aunque no contestaba a sus cartas, esperaba que sí se dignase escuchar sus palabras. Ella contestó que su hijastra estaba cerca y solo podía concederle cinco minutos; entonces él se sacó el reloj y se sentó sobre un bloque roto de piedra.

—Lo que tengo que decirle se cuenta enseguida —dijo Edward Rosier—. ¡He vendido todos mis *bibelots*!

Al oírlo, Isabel lanzó instintivamente una exclamación de horror: era como si le hubiera dicho que le habían arrancado todos los dientes.

—Los vendí en subasta en el Hôtel Drouot —continuó—. Fue hace tres días, y me han telegrafiado para comunicarme el resultado, que ha sido espléndido.

—Me alegro de que así sea, pero preferiría que hubiese conservado esas figuras tan bonitas.

—Pero en su lugar tengo el dinero: cincuenta mil dólares. ¿Me considerará ahora el señor Osmond lo

suficientemente rico?

—¿Es por eso por lo que lo ha hecho? —preguntó Isabel con delicadeza.

—¿Y por qué otra cosa si no? Es lo único en lo que pienso. Fui a París y lo concerté todo, pero no me pude quedar a la subasta, porque no habría podido soportar ver cómo esas piezas se alejaban de mí. Creo que eso me habría matado. No obstante, las he dejado en buenas manos, y me han reportado grandes beneficios. Eso sí, me he quedado los esmaltes. Ahora que tengo el dinero en el bolsillo, su marido ya no podrá decir que soy pobre —dijo el joven en tono desafiante.

—Ahora dirá que es usted un necio —contestó Isabel, como si Gilbert Osmond nunca hubiese afirmado eso mismo con anterioridad.

Rosier le dirigió una intensa mirada.

—¿Se refiere a que sin mis *bibelots* no soy nada? ¿Que eran lo mejor de mí? Eso me dijeron en París; sí, fueron muy sinceros al respecto. ¡Claro que no la han visto a ella!

—Mi querido amigo, se merece usted lograr su propósito —dijo Isabel con mucha amabilidad.

—Lo dice con tanta tristeza que es como si dijera que no me lo merezco. —Y la miró interrogante a los ojos, con los suyos llenos de una clara inquietud. Tenía el aire de alguien que sabía que había sido la comidilla de París durante una semana y eso le había hecho crecerse mucho, pero aun así tenía la dolorosa sospecha de que, pese a ese aumento de estatura social, una o dos personas seguían siendo tan perversas como para considerarlo muy poca cosa—. Sé lo que pasó aquí mientras estaba fuera —prosiguió—. ¿Qué espera el señor Osmond, ahora que ella ha rechazado a lord Warburton?

Isabel lo meditó unos instantes.

—Que se case con otro noble.

—¿Con qué otro noble?

—Con el que él elija.

Rosier se levantó lentamente y se guardó el reloj en el bolsillo del chaleco.

—Se está riendo usted de alguien, pero creo que esta vez no es de mí.

—No era mi intención reírme —dijo Isabel—. Me río muy poco. Ahora es mejor que se vaya.

—¡Me siento muy seguro! —afirmó Rosier sin moverse.

Tal vez fuera cierto, pero era evidente que lo que más le hacía sentirse así era proclamarlo en voz alta, balanceándose con cierta complacencia sobre los pies al tiempo que recorría con la mirada las gradas del Coliseo como si estuviesen llenas de público. De pronto Isabel vio que se le demudaba el color, pues al parecer había más público del que Rosier se había imaginado. Ella se giró y comprobó que sus dos acompañantes regresaban de su excursión.

—Tiene que irse —dijo rápidamente.

—¡Ay, mi buena señora, apiádese de mí! —murmuró Edward Rosier con una voz que estaba en extraña discordancia con la proclama que acabo de citar. Y entonces añadió con mucho ímpetu, como un hombre que en medio de la peor de las miserias tuviese de pronto una feliz idea—: ¿Es esa dama la condesa Gemini? Ardo en deseos de ser presentado a ella.

Isabel lo miró durante un instante.

—No tiene ninguna influencia sobre su hermano.

—Vaya, lo pinta usted como si fuese un auténtico monstruo.

Y Rosier se giró hacia la condesa, que caminaba por delante de Pansy muy animada, lo cual se debía tal vez en parte al hecho de que había visto a su cuñada conversando con un joven muy apuesto.

—Me alegro de que haya conservado los esmaltes —dijo Isabel mientras se alejaba de él para dirigirse inmediatamente a donde estaba Pansy, la cual, al ver a Edward Rosier, se había detenido en seco, bajando la mirada —. Vamos al carruaje —le dijo a la joven con dulzura.

—Sí, se está haciendo tarde —contestó Pansy con aún mayor dulzura, tras lo cual siguió caminando sin decir nada, sin vacilar, sin mirar atrás.

Isabel, sin embargo, se permitió esa última licencia, y así pudo ver que finalmente había tenido lugar el encuentro entre la condesa y el señor Rosier. Este se había quitado el sombrero y estaba saludándola sonriente con una reverencia; obviamente se estaba presentando, mientras la expresiva espalda de la condesa se doblaba levemente ante los ojos de Isabel en una cortés inclinación. No obstante, enseguida perdió de vista tales hechos, ya que tanto ella

como Pansy ocuparon de nuevo sus asientos en el carruaje. La joven, sentada frente a su madrastra, mantuvo al principio la vista fija en el regazo; luego la alzó y miró a Isabel a los ojos. En los de Pansy brilló un pequeño rayo de tristeza, una chispa de tímida emoción, que a Isabel le llegó al alma, a la vez que sentía que la invadía una oleada de envidia al comparar el trémulo anhelo, el definido ideal de aquella niña, con su propia y estéril desesperación.

—¡Mi pobre Pansy! —le dijo con cariño.

—Oh, no, no se preocupe —contestó esta, como deseosa por disculparse.

Después se hizo el silencio; la condesa tardaba en llegar.

—¿Le has enseñado todo a tu tía? ¿Le ha gustado? —preguntó al fin Isabel.

—Sí, le he enseñado todo. Creo que le ha gustado mucho.

—Espero que no estés cansada.

—No, no. No estoy cansada, gracias.

La condesa seguía demorándose, así que Isabel pidió al lacayo que entrase en el Coliseo y le dijera que la estaban esperando. Este volvió al poco con el anuncio de que la signora contessa les rogaba que no la esperaran… ¡volvería a casa en un coche de alquiler!

Alrededor de una semana después de que la impetuosa compasión de esa dama la hubiese puesto del lado del señor Rosier, Isabel, que subía ya bastante tarde a vestirse para la cena, encontró a Pansy sentada en su habitación. La joven, que parecía estar esperándola, se levantó de la silla baja en que estaba.

—Perdone que me haya tomado esta libertad —dijo con voz tenue—. Será la última… durante algún tiempo.

Su voz sonaba extraña, y sus ojos, muy abiertos, tenían una mirada febril y asustada.

—¡No estarás pensando en irte! —exclamó Isabel.

—Vuelvo al convento.

—¿Al convento?

Pansy se aproximó hasta que estuvo lo bastante cerca para rodear a Isabel con sus brazos y apoyar la cabeza en su hombro. Permaneció así un momento, totalmente inmóvil, pero su acompañante podía sentir cómo temblaba. Ese estremecimiento de su pequeño cuerpo expresaba todo lo que ella era incapaz de decir. No obstante, Isabel insistió:

—¿Y por qué vuelves al convento?

—Porque papá cree que es lo mejor. Dice que a una chica joven le conviene de vez en cuando un pequeño retiro. Dice que el mundo, siempre el mundo, es un mal lugar para una chica joven. No es más que una oportunidad para poder alejarme un poco de todo… para meditar. —Hablaba de forma entrecortada, como si apenas confiase en sí misma; entonces añadió, como si recobrase el control—: Creo que papá tiene razón. He estado demasiado en contacto con el mundo este invierno.

Su anuncio tuvo un extraño efecto en Isabel, pues parecía implicar algo más que la propia joven desconocía.

—¿Y cuándo se ha decidido eso? —preguntó—. No sabía nada.

—Papá me lo ha dicho hace media hora. Le pareció más conveniente no hablar mucho del asunto por adelantado. Madame Catherine vendrá a buscarme a las siete y cuarto, y solo me puedo llevar dos vestidos. Solo van a ser unas cuantas semanas, y estoy segura de que me harán mucho bien. Volveré a ver a todas esas señoras que fueron tan agradables conmigo, y a las niñas a las que están educando. Me gustan mucho esas pequeñas —dijo Pansy, provocando un efecto de diminuta grandeza—. Y también aprecio mucho a la madre Catherine. Estaré muy tranquila y podré pensar mucho.

Isabel la escuchó conteniendo el aliento; se sentía casi sobrecogida.

—Espero que pienses alguna vez en mí.

—¡Ah, venga a verme pronto! —exclamó Pansy, en un tono muy diferente al de las heroicas observaciones que acababa de recitar.

Isabel no pudo decir nada más. No entendía nada; lo único que tenía claro era lo poco que aún conocía a su marido. Y por toda respuesta, le dio a su hijastra un largo beso lleno de cariño.

Media hora más tarde supo por su doncella que madame Catherine había llegado en un coche de alquiler y se había vuelto a marchar con la signorina. Al dirigirse al salón antes de la cena encontró sola a la condesa Gemini, la cual comentó el suceso con un enérgico movimiento de cabeza y exclamando:

—*En voilà, ma chère, une pose!*

Pero si se trataba de mera afectación, Isabel no alcanzaba a comprender qué era lo que quería aparentar su marido. Solo podía vislumbrar débilmente que este mantenía más tradiciones de las que ella había supuesto. Estaba tan

acostumbrada a tener mucho cuidado con lo que le decía que, por extraño que pueda resultar, después de que él entrara dudó varios minutos antes de hacer alusión a la repentina partida de su hija. La mencionó cuando ya estaban sentados a la mesa. Isabel se había prohibido volver a preguntar nunca nada más a Osmond, así que lo único que pudo hacer fue una sencilla declaración que le salió con toda naturalidad:

—Voy a echar mucho de menos a Pansy.

Él contempló durante unos instantes, con la cabeza ligeramente inclinada, el centro de flores de la mesa.

—Sí —dijo al fin—, ya había pensado en eso. Tienes que ir a verla, pero tampoco demasiado a menudo. Me imagino que te estarás preguntando por qué la he enviado con las hermanas, pero dudo que te lo pueda hacer entender. De todas formas da igual, no le des vueltas al asunto. Por eso no lo había comentado antes, porque no creía que estuvieses de acuerdo. Siempre he considerado esa posibilidad, ya que creo que forma parte de la educación de una hija. Una hija ha de ser dulce y bella, inocente y gentil. En cambio, con las costumbres en boga hoy día corre el peligro de embrutecerse y ajarse en exceso. Pansy ya está un poco deslustrada, un poco alborotada, porque se ha expuesto demasiado. Hay que apartarla de vez en cuando de esa chusma bulliciosa y avasalladora que se llama a sí misma sociedad… conviene apartarla de vez en cuando de todo eso. Los conventos son lugares muy tranquilos, muy convenientes, muy beneficiosos. Me complace pensar en ella sentada en el viejo jardín, bajo la arcada, entre esas mujeres pacíficas y virtuosas. Muchas de ellas son de buena familia, y varias incluso nobles. Tendrá sus libros y sus dibujos, así como su piano. Lo he dispuesto todo con mucha generosidad. No debe ser algo demasiado ascético, tan solo ofrecer cierta sensación de reclusión. Tendrá mucho tiempo para pensar, y hay algo sobre lo que quiero que piense. —Osmond hablaba de forma pausada y razonable, todavía con la cabeza algo inclinada como si estuviera mirando al centro de flores. Su tono, sin embargo, era el de alguien que, más que estar ofreciendo una explicación, estuviera dando forma a una idea con palabras, casi con imágenes, para comprobar por sí mismo cómo quedaba. Meditó durante unos instantes sobre la estampa que había creado y pareció sentirse enormemente complacido. Luego siguió diciendo—: Al final resulta que los católicos son muy sabios. El convento es una gran institución de la que no podemos prescindir, pues responde a una necesidad fundamental de las familias, o de la propia sociedad. Es una escuela de buenos modales, una escuela de reposo. No quiero apartar a mi hija del mundo —añadió—, ni pretendo que dirija sus pensamientos hacia ningún otro. Este está muy bien, pero en su debida forma, y ella puede dedicarse a pensar en él todo lo que quiera. Se trata tan solo de que lo haga de la forma correcta.

Isabel prestó mucha atención a ese pequeño esbozo, pues lo encontró tremendamente interesante. Parecía demostrarle hasta qué punto era capaz de llegar su marido con tal de salirse con la suya: hasta el punto de idear complicadas artimañas teóricas jugando con la delicada persona de su hija. No acababa de entender sus intenciones, al menos no del todo, pero las comprendía mejor de lo que él quería o se imaginaba, ya que estaba convencida de que todo aquello era un elaborado misterio destinado a ella misma con la intención de obligarla a devanarse los sesos. Osmond había querido hacer algo repentino y arbitrario, algo inesperado y refinado, para marcar diferencias entre sus simpatías y las de ella, y demostrar que, si consideraba a su hija una valiosa obra de arte, era normal que cada vez tuviese más cuidado con los retoques finales. Si quería provocar algún efecto lo había conseguido: aquello había helado el corazón a Isabel. Pansy ya había conocido el convento de niña y había hallado un hogar feliz en él; la joven apreciaba mucho a las buenas hermanas, y estas la apreciaban mucho también, así que de momento no parecía haber una idea concreta de castigo en la suerte que le había tocado. Pero, aun así, la joven se había asustado, y estaba claro que su padre quería producirle una impresión muy severa. La vieja tradición protestante nunca había desaparecido de la mente de Isabel y, mientras estaba pensando en esa sorprendente muestra del carácter de su marido —sentada y mirando, como él, el centro de flores—, la pobre Pansy se convirtió en la heroína de una tragedia. Osmond quería que se supiera que no se arredraba ante nada, mientras que a su esposa cada vez le costaba más fingir que lograba tomar bocado. Sintió cierto alivio al oír la voz aguda y estridente de su cuñada. Al parecer la condesa también había estado pensado sobre el asunto, pero había llegado a una conclusión muy distinta a la de Isabel.

—Es muy absurdo, mi querido Osmond —dijo—, inventarse tantas razones bonitas para justificar el destierro de la pobre Pansy. ¿Por qué no dices directamente que lo que quieres es alejarla de mí? Como si no hubieras descubierto ya que tengo muy buena opinión del señor Rosier. Pues sí, la tengo; me parece *simpaticissimo*. Ha conseguido que crea en el amor verdadero… ¡algo que no me había pasado nunca! Está claro que has llegado a la conclusión de que, con tales convicciones, soy muy mala compañía para Pansy.

Osmond bebió un sorbo de vino con aspecto de estar de muy buen humor.

—Mi querida Amy —respondió, sonriendo como si estuviese diciendo una galantería—, no sé nada de tus

convicciones, pero, si sospechara que interferían con las mías, me sería mucho más sencillo desterrarte a ti.

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La condesa no fue desterrada, pero tampoco quedó muy segura de que fuese a seguir disfrutando de la hospitalidad de su hermano. Una semana después de ese incidente Isabel recibió un telegrama de Inglaterra, fechado en Gardencourt y portador del sello de la autoría de la señora Touchett. «A Ralph no le quedan muchos días —decía—, y si es posible le gustaría verte. Insiste en que te diga que solo vengas si no tienes otras obligaciones. Por mi parte, diré que antes hablabas mucho de tus obligaciones y de cuáles serían estas; tengo curiosidad por ver si ya lo has averiguado. Ralph se está muriendo, y no tiene a nadie más.» La noticia no cogió a Isabel por sorpresa, pues había recibido de Henrietta Stackpole el relato detallado de su viaje a Inglaterra en compañía de su agradecido paciente. Ralph había llegado más muerto que vivo, pero aun así ella había cumplido su objetivo de llevarlo a Gardencourt, donde de inmediato se había postrado en cama, de la que, escribía la señorita Stackpole, era evidente que no volvería a levantarse nunca más. Añadía que, en realidad, se había tenido que ocupar de dos pacientes en vez de uno, ya que el señor Goodwood, que no había sido de ninguna ayuda práctica, estaba tan enfermo como el señor Touchett, aunque de otro modo. Después explicaba que se había visto obligada a ceder el terreno a la señora Touchett, que acababa de regresar de América y se había apresurado a darle a entender que no quería entrevistas en Gardencourt. Isabel había escrito a su tía al poco de llegar Ralph a Roma para comunicarle que su estado era crítico y sugerirle que volviese a Europa lo antes posible. La señora Touchett le había telegrafiado dándose por enterada de la admonición, y después de aquello lo único que Isabel había sabido de ella era a través de este segundo telegrama que acabo de reproducir.

Isabel se quedó un momento mirando esa última misiva; luego, introduciéndola en su bolsillo, se dirigió al estudio de su marido. En la puerta volvió a detenerse un instante, al cabo del cual la abrió y entró. Osmond estaba sentado a la mesa que había cerca de la ventana con un infolio ante él, que tenía apoyado sobre un montón de libros. El volumen estaba abierto por una página de pequeñas láminas en color, e Isabel vio que estaba copiando de ella el dibujo de una moneda antigua. Tenía delante una caja de acuarelas y unos pinceles finos, y ya había transferido a una hoja de papel inmaculado el delicado y cuidadosamente coloreado disco. Estaba de espaldas a la puerta, pero reconoció a su esposa sin girarse.

—Perdona que te moleste —dijo esta.

—Cuando voy a tu habitación siempre llamo —contestó él mientras continuaba con su trabajo.

—Lo he olvidado; estaba pensando en otra cosa. Mi primo se está muriendo.

—No me lo creo —dijo Osmond mirando su dibujo a través de una lupa—. Ya se estaba muriendo cuando nos casamos. Al final nos enterrará a todos.

Isabel no dedicó ningún tiempo ni pensamiento a apreciar el elaborado cinismo de esa afirmación, sino que se limitó a continuar hablando para informarle cuanto antes de su intención.

—Mi tía me ha telegrafiado. Tengo que ir a Gardencourt.

—¿Y para qué tienes que ir a Gardencourt? —preguntó Osmond con tono de imparcial curiosidad.

—Para ver a Ralph antes de que muera.

Durante un tiempo no replicó nada a eso; siguió prestando buena parte de su atención a su obra, que era del tipo que no admitía la menor negligencia.

—No veo la necesidad —dijo al fin—. Él vino a verte aquí, lo cual no me gustó nada, ya que consideré un gran error su presencia en Roma. Aun así lo consentí, porque iba a ser la última vez que lo vieras. Y ahora me dices que no va a ser la última. Eres muy desagradecida.

—¿Y por qué habría de estarte agradecida?

Gilbert Osmond dejó sus delicados utensilios de trabajo, sopló una mota de polvo del dibujo, se levantó lentamente y, por primera vez, miró a su esposa.

—Por no haber interferido mientras él estaba aquí.

—Oh, sí, estoy muy agradecida. Recuerdo perfectamente la claridad con que me dijiste que no te gustaba que hubiese venido, tanto que hasta me alegré mucho cuando se marchó.

—En ese caso, déjalo estar. No vayas corriendo detrás de él.

Isabel apartó la mirada de su marido, y la fijó en el pequeño dibujo de este.

—Tengo que ir a Inglaterra —repitió, consciente de que su tono podría resultar estúpidamente obstinado para un irritable hombre de tan buen gusto.

—Si lo haces, no va a gustarme nada —afirmó Osmond.

—¿Y qué más da? Si no lo hago tampoco te gustará. No te complace nada de lo que hago o dejo de hacer. Siempre te comportas como si creyeras que miento.

Osmond palideció un poco y sonrió con frialdad.

—Entonces, ¿es por eso por lo que tienes que ir? ¿No para ver a tu primo, sino para vengarte de mí?

—No sé nada de venganzas.

—Pero yo sí —dijo Osmond—, así que no me des ningún pretexto.

—Estás deseando tener alguno. Lo que más te gustaría es que yo cometiera alguna locura.

—Según eso, debería complacerme mucho que me desobedecieras.

—¿Que te desobedeciera? —dijo Isabel en una voz baja que casi parecía amable.

—Dejémoslo claro. Si te vas hoy de Roma, lo consideraré un acto de rebeldía totalmente deliberado y premeditado.

—¿Cómo puedes decir que es premeditado? ¡Pero si he recibido el telegrama de mi tía hace unos minutos!

—Eres muy rápida haciendo planes, lo cual es un gran mérito por tu parte. Y no veo motivo alguno para que prolonguemos esta discusión, puesto que ya conoces cuáles son mis deseos.

Y permaneció como si esperara que ella se retirase, pese a lo cual Isabel no se movió. No podía hacerlo, por extraño que parezca, porque sentía aún la necesidad de justificarse. Osmond poseía en grado sumo la habilidad de hacerle sentir dicha necesidad. Había algo en Isabel que permitía que él siempre consiguiera provocarla, por mucho que ella misma supiera que era un error.

—No tienes ninguna razón para tales deseos —dijo ella—, mientras que yo tengo todas las del mundo para ir. No te imaginas lo injusto que me pareces, aunque creo que lo sabes de sobra. Es tu propia negativa la que es premeditada, además de maligna.

Nunca antes le había expresado a su marido sus peores pensamientos acerca de él, y la sensación de oírlos debió de ser sin duda toda una novedad para Osmond. Sin embargo, este no mostró sorpresa alguna, y su frialdad pareció demostrar que pensaba que su esposa nunca sería capaz de resistirse a sus ingeniosos ardides para hacerla hablar.

—Eso la hace aún más intensa —contestó. Y añadió, casi como si le diese un consejo de amigo—: Se trata de un asunto muy importante. —Isabel se daba cuenta de eso, y era plenamente consciente de la trascendencia de la situación, pues sabía que habían llegado a un momento crítico. Su gravedad la hizo ser cuidadosa y no decir nada, así que él siguió hablando—. ¿Dices que no tengo ninguna razón? Tengo las mejores razones. Me desagrada en lo más profundo de mi alma eso que pretendes hacer. Es deshonroso, descortés e indecente. Tu primo no significa nada en absoluto para mí, y no tengo la menor obligación de hacerle ninguna concesión. Ya le he hecho la más espléndida que podría. Tu relación con él, mientras estaba aquí, me tenía constantemente sobre ascuas, pero aún así lo dejé estar porque semana tras semana esperaba que se fuese. Nunca me ha gustado, ni yo le he gustado nunca a él. Por eso te gusta a ti: porque me odia —dijo Osmond con un ligero y apenas perceptible temblor en la voz—. Tengo muy claro lo que mi esposa debería y no debería hacer, y desde luego no debería viajar sola por toda Europa, en contra de mis más profundos deseos, para sentarse a la cabecera de la cama de otros hombres. Tu primo no es nada para ti; no es nada para nosotros. Sonríes de manera muy expresiva cuando hablo de «nosotros», pero te aseguro que ese «nosotros», señora Osmond, es lo único que me importa. Me tomo nuestro matrimonio muy en serio, mientras que tú pareces haber encontrado la forma de no hacerlo. No tengo la menor sensación de que estemos divorciados o separados; para mí, estamos indisolublemente unidos. Estás más cerca de mí que ningún otro ser humano, como yo lo estoy de ti. Puede que sea una proximidad desagradable, pero aun así es la que ambos hemos buscado deliberadamente. Ya sé que no te gusta que te lo recuerde, pero lo hago con toda la intención porque… porque —e hizo una pausa, adoptando el aire de quien va a decir algo trascendental—: porque creo que debemos aceptar las consecuencias de nuestras acciones, ¡y lo que más valoro en la vida es que uno cumpla su palabra!

Habló con seriedad y en tono casi amable, prescindiendo de cualquier nota de sarcasmo. Esa seriedad refrenó los rápidos impulsos emocionales de su esposa, y la determinación con que esta había entrado en la habitación se vio atrapada en una maraña de finos hilos. Sus últimas palabras no eran una orden, constituían una especie de apelación y, aunque ella sabía que cualquier manifestación de respeto por parte de él solo podía ser una rebuscada forma de

egoísmo, no dejaban de representar algo trascendente y absoluto, como la señal de la cruz o la bandera del propio país. Hablaba en nombre de algo sagrado y valioso: la observancia de una espléndida unión. Estaban tan separados sentimentalmente como dos enamorados desencantados pudieran haberlo estado jamás, pero hasta el momento nunca se habían separado físicamente. Isabel no había cambiado, y todavía sentía la misma pasión por la justicia, que, en esos momentos, en plena constatación de la blasfema sofistería de su marido, comenzó a latir a un ritmo que por un instante pareció prometerle a él la victoria. Isabel pensó que, al fin y al cabo, el deseo de su marido de guardar las apariencias era sincero, y que eso de por sí tenía un gran mérito. Diez minutos antes ella había sentido toda la dicha de lanzarse a la acción irreflexiva, una dicha que hacía tanto tiempo que le era extraña; pero la acción se había transformado de repente en lenta renuncia a causa de la letal estocada de Osmond. No obstante, si había de renunciar, se encargaría de dejarle claro que era víctima de la voluntad de él, y no una simple incauta.

—Ya sé que eres un maestro de la farsa —dijo—. ¿Cómo puedes hablar de una unión indisoluble? ¿Cómo puedes decir que te sientes satisfecho? ¿Dónde está nuestra unión cuando me acusas de falsedad? ¿Dónde está tu satisfacción cuando lo único que tienes en el corazón son sospechas odiosas?

—En que vivamos juntos decentemente, pese a todos esos inconvenientes.

—¡Pero es que no vivimos juntos decentemente! —exclamó Isabel.

—Por supuesto que no, si te vas a Inglaterra.

—Eso es muy poco, o nada. Podría hacer mucho más.

Osmond arqueó las cejas, e incluso un tanto los hombros. Llevaba viviendo el suficiente tiempo en Italia para percatarse enseguida del ardid.

—En fin, si has venido a amenazarme, creo que prefiero seguir dibujando.

Y volvió a la mesa, cogió la hoja de papel en la que había estado trabajando y comenzó a examinarla.

—Supongo que, si me marcho, no esperarás que vuelva —dijo Isabel.

Él se giró rápidamente, y ella se dio cuenta de que aquel movimiento, cuando menos no era premeditado. Osmond la miró un momento, y a continuación preguntó:

—¿Es que te has vuelto loca?

—¿Qué otra cosa podría ser sino una ruptura? —continuó ella—. Sobre todo, si es cierto cuanto dices.

No veía que aquello pudiera ser nada más que una ruptura, por más que hubiera deseado de corazón saber qué otra cosa podría ser si no.

Él se sentó de nuevo ante la mesa.

—Me niego a discutir contigo el caso hipotético de que llegaras a atreverte a desafiarme —dijo, tras lo cual volvió a coger uno de sus pequeños pinceles.

Isabel permaneció allí solo un instante más, el suficiente para contemplar con todo detalle la estampa de él, que pese a su intencionada indiferencia resultaba muy expresiva, y después se marchó rápidamente de la habitación. Sus facultades, energía y pasión habían vuelto a dispersarse por completo, y sentía como si una niebla fría y oscura la hubiese rodeado súbitamente. Osmond poseía en grado sumo la habilidad de potenciar cualquier debilidad de ella. Mientras volvía a su habitación se encontró con la condesa Gemini, que estaba ante la puerta abierta de una pequeña sala que contenía una heterogénea colección de libros. La condesa tenía un volumen abierto en las manos, y parecía haber estado mirando una página que no había logrado despertar su interés. Al oír los pasos de Isabel levantó la cabeza.

—Ah, querida —dijo—, tú que eres tan versada en literatura, ¿podrías recomendarme algún libro entretenido? Todo lo que hay aquí es muy aburrido. ¿Crees que este estaría bien?

Isabel vio el título del volumen que sostenía, pero sin leerlo ni entenderlo.

—Lo siento, pero no te puedo aconsejar ahora. Acabo de recibir malas noticias. Mi primo, Ralph Touchett, se está muriendo.

La condesa dejó el libro.

—Oh, vaya, con lo simpático que era. Lo siento mucho.

—Lo sentirías aún más si lo supieras todo.

—¿Qué es lo que hay que saber? Tienes muy mal aspecto —añadió la condesa—. Debes de haber estado con Osmond.

Media hora antes Isabel habría respondido con gran frialdad a cualquier insinuación de que alguna vez llegaría a sentir la necesidad de recibir la compasión de su cuñada, y no puede haber mejor prueba del azoramiento que la

embargaba en esos momentos que el hecho de que se aferrara al instante a la volátil atención de dicha dama.

—Sí, he estado con Osmond —dijo, mientras los brillantes ojos de la condesa la miraban refulgentes.

—¡Entonces seguro que ha estado odioso! —exclamó esta—. ¿Ha dicho que se alegra de que el pobre señor Touchett se esté muriendo?

—Ha dicho que es imposible que yo vaya a Inglaterra.

La mente de la condesa era muy ágil en lo que concernía a sus propios intereses, y enseguida previó la desaparición de futuros divertimentos durante su estancia en Roma. Ralph Touchett moriría, Isabel se pondría de luto y se acabarían las alegres veladas. Semejante perspectiva dibujó durante un instante en su rostro una mueca muy expresiva, pero ese rápido y pintoresco cambio de rasgos fue su único tributo a la decepción. Se dijo que, al fin y al cabo, el juego casi había tocado a su fin, y ya llevaba allí más tiempo del convenido en la invitación inicial. Y entonces ya pudo olvidarse de sus propios problemas e interesarse por el de Isabel, que sin duda era grave. Parecía más grave que la mera muerte de un primo, y la condesa no dudó en relacionar a su exasperante hermano con la expresión que veía en los ojos de su cuñada. El corazón empezó a latirle preso de una esperanza casi gozosa, pues quería ver a Osmond vencido, y en esos momentos parecían darse las condiciones ideales. Por supuesto, si Isabel se iba a Inglaterra, ella abandonaría el palazzo Roccanera de inmediato; por nada del mundo se quedaría allí con Osmond. Aun así, sentía un inmenso deseo de oír decir a Isabel que se iría a Inglaterra.

—No hay nada que sea imposible para ti, querida —dijo con ternura—. ¿Para qué si no eres rica, lista y buena?

—Eso… ¿para qué? Me siento estúpida y débil.

—¿Por qué dice Osmond que es imposible? —preguntó la condesa en un tono que dejaba claro que no se lo podía imaginar.

No obstante, desde el momento en que empezó a interrogarla de tal modo, Isabel retrocedió un poco y apartó la mano que la condesa le había cogido con afecto. Aun así, contestó a esa pregunta con franca amargura.

—Porque somos tan felices juntos que no podemos separarnos ni dos semanas.

—¡Ah —dijo la condesa mientras Isabel se giraba para marcharse—, cuando yo quiero irme de viaje mi marido solo me dice que no tendré dinero para ello!

Isabel fue a su habitación, donde estuvo caminando de un lado para otro durante una hora. Puede que parezca a algunos lectores que todo aquello la había afectado en exceso, y es cierto que, para tratarse de una mujer de tan elevado espíritu, había dejado que le parasen los pies con extrema facilidad. No obstante, Isabel había llegado a la conclusión de que hasta ese momento no había entendido en toda su magnitud la gran empresa que era el matrimonio. Significaba que, en un caso como aquel, cuando había que elegir, se elegía por norma lo que decía el marido. «Tengo miedo, sí, mucho miedo», se dijo en más de una ocasión, deteniéndose bruscamente. Pero a lo que tenía miedo no era a su marido —a su disgusto, a su odio, a su venganza—, y ni siquiera a las recientes valoraciones que ella había realizado de su propia conducta, algo que en más de una ocasión la había contenido: era sencillamente al acto violento que representaría el hecho de marchase, cuando Osmond quería que se quedase. Se había abierto un abismo de diferencias entre ellos, pero aún así él quería que se quedase, y le resultaría horrible que se fuese. Conocía perfectamente la sutileza nerviosa con que él podía sentir que le llevaran la contraria. También sabía lo que pensaba de ella, y había intuido lo que sería capaz de decirle. Aun así, estaban casados, y el matrimonio significaba que la mujer debía ser fiel al hombre con el que se había presentado ante el altar y había pronunciado esos votos terriblemente comprometedores. Isabel se hundió en el sofá y enterró la cabeza entre un montón de cojines.

Cuando la levantó, la condesa Gemini volvía a estar ante ella. Había entrado sin que Isabel se diera cuenta; tenía una extraña sonrisa en sus finos labios, y en la hora transcurrida su rostro parecía haberse iluminado debido a una brillante revelación. Sin duda la condesa vivía siempre, por así decirlo, asomada a la ventana de su espíritu, pero en esos momentos parecía inclinarse más que nunca fuera del alféizar.

—He llamado —dijo—, pero como no contestabas, me he atrevido a entrar. He estado observándote los últimos cinco minutos, y veo que eres muy desdichada.

—Sí, pero no creo que puedas consolarme.

—¿Me dejas que lo intente?

Y la condesa se sentó a su lado en el sofá. Seguía sonriendo, con un gesto en el que había algo expresivo y exultante. Parecía tener mucho que decir, e Isabel pensó por primera vez que quizá su cuñada fuera a expresar algo verdaderamente humano. Sus ojillos jugueteaban con un brillo en el que se percibía una desagradable fascinación.

—Al fin y al cabo —continuó al momento—, lo que tengo que decirte es que, para empezar, no entiendo por qué

estás así. Siempre tienes tantos escrúpulos, tantas razones, tantas ataduras. Cuando descubrí hace diez años que el mayor anhelo de mi esposo era hacerme infeliz… últimamente se limita a dejarme a mi aire… ah, fue una forma maravillosa de simplificarlo todo. El problema es que tú, mi pobre Isabel, no eres lo bastante simple.

—Cierto, no soy lo bastante simple.

—Hay algo que quiero que sepas —afirmó la condesa—, porque creo que debes saberlo. Puede que ya te lo hayas imaginado, que ya lo sepas. Si es así, lo único que puedo decir es que me cuesta entender aún más por qué no haces lo que te plazca.

—¿Qué es lo que quieres que sepa?

Isabel tenía un mal presentimiento que hacía que el corazón le latiera más deprisa. La condesa se disponía a dar explicaciones, y eso era ya de por sí muy significativo. No obstante, parecía que primero prefería seguir dándole vueltas al tema.

—Yo ya me lo habría figurado hace siglos. ¿De verdad que nunca has sospechado nada?

—No me he figurado nada de nada. ¿Qué es lo que tendría que sospechar? No sé de qué me estás hablando.

—Eso es porque tienes una mente increíblemente pura, como jamás he visto en ninguna otra mujer —dijo la condesa.

Isabel se levantó muy despacio.

—Vas a decirme algo horrible.

—Puedes llamarlo como mejor te parezca.

Y la condesa se levantó también, mientras la perversidad de la que había hecho acopio se volvía más vívida y temible. La observó un momento con una mirada que era como una declaración de intenciones y, como le pareció a Isabel incluso entonces, llena de extraordinaria fealdad; después dijo:

—Mi primera cuñada no tuvo hijos.

Isabel le devolvió la mirada. Semejante anuncio no dejaba de ser un anticlímax.

—¿Tu primera cuñada?

—Supongo que por lo menos sabrás, si es que se puede decir, que Osmond ya había estado casado antes. Nunca te he hablado de su esposa anterior porque no me parecía muy decoroso o respetuoso, pero me imagino que otros con menos prejuicios sí lo habrán hecho. La pobre mujer murió después de tres años de matrimonio sin haber tenido hijos. Pansy no llegó hasta después de su muerte.

Isabel había fruncido el ceño, y tenía los labios entreabiertos en una expresión de pálida y vaga sorpresa. Intentaba captar todo lo que decía su cuñada, ya que sus palabras parecían ocultar un gran trasfondo.

—Entonces, ¿Pansy no es hija de mi marido?

—De tu marido… ¡claro! No es del marido de otra mujer, sino de la esposa de otro hombre. Contigo, mi querida Isabel —exclamó la condesa—, siempre hay que explicarlo todo.

—No entiendo nada. ¿De la esposa de quién? —preguntó Isabel.

—De la esposa de un suizo horrible que murió… ¿cuánto hace…?, doce, no, hace más de quince años. Él nunca reconoció a Pansy, ni, sabiendo lo que había, quiso saber nada de ella, y tampoco había razón para que lo hiciera. Osmond sí que la reconoció, y eso fue mucho mejor; aunque entonces, para que todo cuadrase, tuvo que inventarse toda una historia de que su esposa había muerto al dar a luz y él, roto de pena y horror, había alejado a la criatura de su vista todo el tiempo que había podido hasta que decidió traerla de vuelta a casa del sitio donde la había dejado para que la criaran. En realidad su esposa había muerto de otra cosa y en otro lugar muy distintos; fue en las montañas del Piamonte, adonde se fueron un agosto porque la salud de ella parecía necesitar aire fresco, pero una vez allí de repente empeoró… y murió. La gente se creyó la historia, porque guardaron las apariencias durante tanto tiempo que nadie hizo mucho caso ni se tomó la molestia de investigar. Pero, por supuesto, yo sí que supe toda la verdad sin necesidad de hacer averiguaciones —continuó la condesa con lucidez—, y, como comprenderás, sin que tampoco comentáramos entre nosotros ni una palabra del tema; quiero decir, Osmond y yo. ¿No te lo imaginas mirándome en silencio, de esa forma tan suya, para acabar con el tema? Es decir, para acabar conmigo, si se me ocurría decir algo. Y no he dicho nada a nadie, nunca, aunque no te lo creas tratándose de mí. Te doy mi palabra, querida, de que es la primera vez que hablo de esto después de tanto tiempo. Desde el principio me bastó con que la niña fuera mi sobrina, ya que era hija de mi hermano. En cuanto a su verdadera madre…

Pero entonces la extraordinaria tía de Pansy se detuvo; fue de forma involuntaria, debido a la impresión que le produjo el rostro de su cuñada, desde el que parecían mirarla más ojos de los que jamás había tenido que soportar.

No había dicho ningún nombre y, sin embargo, Isabel sentía en sus propios labios el eco del que no había sido nombrado. Se volvió a hundir en el asiento dejando caer la cabeza.

—¿Por qué me has contado eso? —preguntó con una voz que la condesa apenas reconoció.

—Porque estaba harta de que no lo supieras. Porque, francamente, querida, estaba harta de no habértelo contado; como si, estúpidamente, no hubiese tenido ocasión de hacerlo en todo ese tiempo. *Ça me dépasse*, si me permites que te lo diga, todo cuanto te rodea y de lo que pareces enterarte. Siempre se me ha dado muy mal, eso de prestar ayuda a la ignorancia inocente. Pero, en este caso, ya se me ha agotado la virtud, y no estoy dispuesta a seguir callando por el bien de mi hermano. Además, te aseguro que no es ninguna mentira malintencionada —añadió la condesa con su inimitable estilo—. Los hechos son tal y como te los cuento.

—No tenía la menor idea —dijo Isabel al cabo de un momento, y levantó la cabeza mirándola de un modo que se ajustaba sin duda a la evidente simplicidad de dicha confesión.

—Eso pensaba, por más que me costara creerlo. ¿De verdad que nunca llegaste a sospechar que durante seis o siete años fueron amantes?

—No lo sé. A veces he pensado cosas… y quizá fuera eso lo que significaban.

—Ella se ha comportado de forma extraordinariamente inteligente, magistral, con respecto a Pansy —afirmó la condesa a la vista de todo el asunto.

—Oh, de verdad que sobre ese asunto nunca se me había pasado nada por la mente —dijo Isabel, que parecía estar intentando desentrañar en qué había o no pensado—. Y, de hecho, sigo sin entenderlo.

Hablaba como alguien desconcertado y preocupado, pero, aun así, la pobre condesa tenía la sensación de que su revelación no había provocado todo el efecto que quería. Con ella había esperado hacer estallar un gran fogonazo, pero solo había conseguido hacer saltar una chispa. Isabel, en su condición de joven mujer de probada inteligencia, parecía igual de impresionada que si se hubiese enterado de algún suculento y siniestro pasaje de la historia pública.

—¿No ves que la niña nunca habría podido pasar por hija de su marido? Es decir, a los ojos del propio señor Merle —prosiguió la condesa—. Llevaban mucho tiempo separados, y él se había marchado a algún país remoto, creo que a Sudamérica. Si ella había tenido más hijos con anterioridad, de lo cual no estoy segura, los había perdido. Dio la casualidad de que las circunstancias permitían, aunque bajo presión por ser en un momento tan delicado, que Osmond reconociera a la niña. Su esposa había muerto… cierto; pero no hacía tanto tiempo como para que, mediante un cierto ajuste de fechas, pudieran hacerlo sin levantar ninguna sospecha, que era su principal preocupación. Resultaba perfectamente natural que la pobre señora Osmond, en la distancia y ante un mundo que no se preocupaba por nimiedades, hubiese dejado tras ella, *poverina*, el breve fruto de la felicidad que le había costado la vida. Con la ayuda de un cambio de residencia, ya que Osmond y ella vivían en Nápoles cuando se fueron a pasar esa temporada a los Alpes, y a su debido tiempo él se marchó de la ciudad para siempre, consiguieron hacer creíble la historia. Mi pobre cuñada no podía hacer nada desde la tumba, y la verdadera madre, para salvar el pellejo, renunció a todo parentesco o derecho sobre la niña.

—¡Ah, pobre, pobre mujer! —exclamó Isabel, tras lo cual estalló en lágrimas.

Hacía mucho tiempo que no derramaba ninguna, pues había desarrollado una fuerte prevención contra los accesos de llanto. Pero en esos momentos las lágrimas fluyeron con una abundancia que para la condesa Gemini solo supuso otra decepción.

—¡Qué amable de tu parte compadecerte de ella! —dijo con una risa discordante—. Sí, desde luego tienes una forma de ser que…

—Engañó a su mujer, y además tuvo que ser desde bien pronto —dijo Isabel, recobrando de pronto la compostura.

—Era ya lo único que faltaba, que te pusieras de parte de ella —continuó la condesa—. No obstante, te doy la razón en que fue muy pronto.

—¿Y a mí? ¿A mí me…?

E Isabel vaciló como si no se hubiese escuchado bien a sí misma, como si su pregunta, aunque la tenía bien clara ante los ojos, solo fuera para ella.

—A ti te ha sido fiel. Cuando se casó contigo ya no estaba con ninguna otra mujer… aunque menudo amante había estado hecho, *cara mia,* con todos los riesgos y precauciones que tuvo que tomar mientras duró lo de ellos dos. Ese asunto ya había terminado; la dama se había arrepentido o, cuando menos, había tenido sus razones para retirarse. A ella también le gustaba guardar tanto las apariencias que hasta el propio Osmond terminó por cansarse. Y ya te podrás imaginar lo que tuvo que ser para él… intentar disimularlo todo ante su círculo. Aun así, todo lo pasado

quedó entre ellos dos.

—Sí —dijo Isabel mecánicamente, haciéndose eco de esas palabras—, todo lo pasado ha quedado entre ellos dos.

—Bueno, en el pasado más reciente no ha ocurrido nada. Pero, como digo, durante seis o siete años estuvieron juntos.

Isabel permaneció en silencio durante un momento.

—Pero entonces, ¿por qué quiso ella que él se casara conmigo?

—¡Ay, querida mía, ese fue el gran triunfo de esa mujer! Pues porque tenías dinero, y porque pensó que te portarías bien con Pansy.

—¡Pobre mujer… ni siquiera le agrada a Pansy! —exclamó Isabel.

—Por eso quería a alguien que sí le agradara a Pansy. Ella es muy lista; ella lo sabe todo.

—¿Llegará a saber que me has contado esto?

—Eso dependerá de si tú se lo cuentas. Ella ya está preparada por si llega el caso, y… ¿sabes en qué confía para defenderse? En que creas que te estoy mintiendo. Quizá sea eso lo que pienses, y no hace falta que te molestes en disimularlo. Pero da la casualidad de que esta vez no estoy mintiendo. En esta vida he contado bastantes embustes estúpidos, pero que nunca han hecho daño a nadie, salvo a mí misma.

Isabel estaba absorta escuchando la historia, como si estuviese mirando un fardo de fantásticas mercancías que algún gitano ambulante hubiese desplegado a sus pies sobre la alfombra.

—¿Por qué no se casó Osmond con ella? —preguntó al fin.

—Porque ella no tenía dinero. —La condesa tenía respuesta para todo y, si estaba mintiendo, desde luego lo hacía muy bien—. Nadie sabe ni ha sabido jamás de qué vive ella, ni cómo ha conseguido todas esas cosas tan bonitas que tiene. No creo que ni Osmond lo sepa. Además, ella nunca se habría casado con él.

—Entonces, ¿cómo pudo amarle?

—No lo ama de ese modo. Lo hizo al principio, y supongo que entonces sí se habría casado con él, pero en aquellos momentos su marido aún vivía. Luego, cuando el señor Merle fue a reunirse con… iba a decir con sus antepasados, pero no creo que ese hombre los tuviera, la relación de ella con Osmond ya había cambiado, y ella misma se había vuelto más ambiciosa. Además, respecto a él, madame Merle nunca se ha hecho… —continuó la condesa, dejando que Isabel se estremeciera trágicamente con el suspense—, mejor dicho, nunca se había hecho muchas ilusiones en lo que podríamos llamar su «inteligencia». Esperaba poder casarse con algún hombre importante; esa ha sido siempre su idea. Para eso ha esperado, vigilado, conspirado y rezado, pero nunca lo ha conseguido. No sé si todavía podrá conseguir algo, pero de momento tiene muy poco que la avale. El único resultado tangible que ha llegado a obtener (a excepción, por supuesto, de conocer a todo el mundo y alojarse con ellos gratis) ha sido el de juntaros a Osmond y a ti. Oh, sí, ella lo hizo, querida, no hace falta que pongas cara de que lo dudas. Llevo años observándolos, y lo sé todo, todo. La gente me toma por una cabeza de chorlito, pero en este asunto me he aplicado mucho para no perderme ni un detalle de esos dos. Ella me odia, y su forma de demostrarlo es hacer como si estuviera siempre defendiéndome. Cuando la gente dice que he tenido quince amantes, ella pone cara de espanto y afirma que la mitad nunca se han podido demostrar. Me tiene miedo desde hace años, y le encanta que la gente diga cosas viles y falsas de mí. Siempre ha temido que la desenmascare, y hasta un día me amenazó cuando Osmond comenzó a hacerte la corte. Fue en casa de él en Florencia. ¿Te acuerdas de aquella tarde en que ella te llevó allí y tomamos el té en el jardín? Me dijo entonces que, si me dedicaba a contar historias, ella también sabía jugar a ese juego. Hace como si hubiera mucho más que contar de mí que de ella. Desde luego sería una comparación muy interesante. Me importa un bledo lo que pueda decirte de mí, sencillamente porque sé que a ti también te importa un bledo. Nunca podrías interesarte por mí menos de lo que ya lo haces, así que me da igual cómo decida vengarse; tampoco creo que eso vaya a asustarte mucho. Su gran obsesión siempre ha sido parecer la persona más irreprochable del mundo, una especie de lirio en flor, la viva imagen del decoro. Siempre ha adorado a ese dios. Ya sabes… no debe haber escándalos sobre la mujer del César, y ella siempre ha querido casarse con el César. Esa es una de las razones por las que no se habría casado con Osmond, por miedo a que, al verla con Pansy, la gente atara cabos y acabara encontrando algún parecido. Siempre la ha aterrorizado que la madre llegara a traicionarla a ella misma. Por eso ha tenido siempre tanto cuidado, y gracias a ello la madre nunca ha podido traicionarse.

—Sí, la madre sí que se ha traicionado —dijo Isabel, que lo había escuchado todo mientras palidecía por momentos —. Se traicionó conmigo el otro día, aunque no me di cuenta entonces. Fue cuando pareció que Pansy había tenido la oportunidad de hacer una gran boda, y la decepción porque no hubiese llegado a buen término casi le quitó la

máscara.

—¡Sí, eso es lo que la pierde! —exclamó la condesa—. Como ha fracasado tan estrepitosamente consigo misma, quiere compensarlo con su hija.

Isabel se sobresaltó al oír las palabras «su hija», que su invitada había dicho con tanta naturalidad.

—Es todo tan increíble —murmuró, y, embargada por esa sensación de desconcierto, casi olvidó que la historia la afectaba personalmente.

—¡No vayas a tomarla ahora con esa pobre niña inocente! —dijo la condesa—. Es encantadora pese a sus lamentables orígenes. Hasta yo misma he llegado a apreciarla mucho, y no, naturalmente, porque fuese hija de ella, sino porque había pasado a ser tuya.

—Sí, ha pasado a ser mía. ¡Cuánto debe de haber sufrido esa pobre mujer viéndome…! —exclamó Isabel sonrojándose ante la idea.

—No creo que haya sufrido. Al contrario, ha disfrutado. El matrimonio de Osmond ha dado a su hija un gran impulso. Antes de eso la pobre vivía en un agujero. ¿Y sabes qué debió de pensar la madre? Que a lo mejor le cogías tanto cariño a la niña que hacías algo por ella. Estaba claro que, al ser tan pobre, Osmond no podía darle ninguna dote, pero todo eso ya lo sabes tú. Ay, querida mía —suspiró la condesa—, ¿por qué tuviste que heredar tanto dinero? —Se detuvo un momento, como si viera algo extraño en el rostro de Isabel—. No me digas que sí piensas darle dote…Ya sé que eres muy capaz de hacerlo, pero me resisto a creerlo. No intentes ser tan buena. Tómate las cosas con un poco más de tranquilidad, de naturalidad, de malicia. Por tu propio bien, trata de ser un poco malvada por una vez en tu vida.

—Es todo muy extraño. Ya sé que debería pensar de otro modo, pero el caso es que me da mucha pena —dijo Isabel—. Y te estoy muy agradecida, por supuesto.

—¡Nadie lo diría! —exclamó la condesa con una risa irónica—. Puede que lo estés o puede que no. Desde luego, no te lo has tomado como creía que harías.

—¿Y cómo debería tomármelo? —preguntó Isabel.

—Bueno, pues como una mujer a la que han utilizado. —Isabel no contestó nada; tan solo escuchaba, así que la condesa continuó—: Siempre han estado unidos esos dos; incluso siguieron estándolo después de que ella rompiera… o de que rompiera él. Pero él siempre ha sido más importante para ella que ella para él. Cuando acabó su pequeño carnaval acordaron darse mutuamente libertad total, pero también que harían todo lo posible para ayudarse entre ellos. Te preguntarás cómo puedo saber eso. Pues lo sé por la forma en que se han comportado. ¡Ahí es donde se ve que las mujeres somos mucho mejores que los hombres! Ella le encontró una esposa a Osmond, pero Osmond nunca ha movido un dedo por ella. Ella se ha esforzado por él, ha conspirado por él, ha sufrido por él, hasta en más de una ocasión le ha conseguido dinero, y al final resulta que él se ha cansado de ella. Ya solo la ve como una vieja costumbre; hay momentos en que la necesita, pero en conjunto no la echaría de menos si desapareciera. Y, lo que es más, ella lo sabe. Así que no hace falta ni que te molestes en sentir celos —añadió la condesa con humor.

Isabel se volvió a levantar del sofá. Se sentía herida y sin aliento, y la cabeza le bullía con toda la información recibida.

—Te estoy muy agradecida —repitió, y de pronto, en un tono bien distinto, añadió—: ¿Y tú cómo sabes todo eso?

Esa pregunta pareció contrariar a la condesa más de lo que la complacía la expresión de gratitud de Isabel. Miró a esta fijamente y exclamó:

—¡Pongamos que me lo he inventado todo! —No obstante, también ella cambió repentinamente de tono y, poniendo una mano en el brazo de Isabel, dijo con una penetrante y brillante sonrisa—: Y ahora, ¿desistirás de tu viaje?

Isabel dio un pequeño respingo y se apartó, pero se sentía tan débil que al momento tuvo que apoyar el brazo en la repisa de la chimenea. Permaneció así un minuto, y luego dejó caer la aturdida cabeza sobre el brazo, con los ojos cerrados y los labios pálidos.

—He hecho mal en hablar. Te has puesto enferma —se lamentó la condesa.

—¡Tengo que ir a ver a Ralph! —gimió Isabel.

No lo dijo con resentimiento, ni presa del arrebato de pasión que había esperado su acompañante, sino en un tono de infinita y trascendental tristeza.

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Salía un tren para Turín y París esa misma noche y, después de que la condesa se hubiese marchado, Isabel mantuvo una rápida y decisiva conversación con su doncella, que era discreta, fiel y eficiente. Después de eso solo pensó en una cosa aparte del viaje: tenía que ir a ver a Pansy, pues a ella no podía abandonarla. No había ido a visitarla todavía, ya que Osmond le había dado a entender que aún era pronto. A las cinco de la tarde su carruaje se detuvo ante una alta puerta que había en una estrecha calle del barrio de la piazza Navona, y allí fue recibida por la portera del convento, que era una persona afable y servicial. Ya conocía la institución, pues en una ocasión había acompañado a Pansy a visitar a las hermanas. Sabía que eran buenas mujeres, y comprobó que las grandes habitaciones presentaban un aspecto limpio y alegre, y que el bien aprovechado jardín ofrecía sol en invierno y sombra en primavera. Aun así, no le gustaba aquel lugar, ya que sentía cierto rechazo y casi la asustaba hasta el punto de que por nada del mundo habría pasado una noche allí. Ese día le produjo más que nunca la impresión de que era una confortable prisión, pues era imposible creer que Pansy fuera libre para marcharse cuando quisiese. Ahora veía a esa inocente criatura con nuevos y terribles ojos, pero la revelación había tenido el efecto secundario de que quisiera más que nunca tenderle una mano.

La portera la dejó esperando en una sala del convento mientras iba a informar de que la querida señorita tenía una visita. La sala era una estancia enorme y fría, con mobiliario que parecía nuevo; había una estufa de porcelana blanca sin encender, grande y limpia, una colección de flores de cera bajo cubiertas de cristal, y una serie de grabados de escenas religiosas en las paredes. En la ocasión anterior el lugar le había parecido a Isabel más propio de Filadelfia que de Roma, pero esa vez no pensó nada, sino que la estancia tan solo le resultó muy vacía y silenciosa. La portera volvió al cabo de unos cinco minutos acompañada por otra persona. Isabel se levantó esperando ver a una de las hermanas, pero para su gran sorpresa se encontró frente a madame Merle. El efecto fue extraño, pues esta se hallaba ya tan presente en su mente que su aparición en carne y hueso fue como ver, de repente y con bastante espanto, una imagen pintada que comenzara a moverse. Isabel llevaba todo el día dándole vueltas a su falsedad, su audacia, su habilidad, su posible sufrimiento, y todas esas ideas sombrías parecieron destellar con una luz repentina al entrar ella en la habitación. Su presencia allí tenía el desagradable carácter de una prueba acusatoria, caligráfica, de las reliquias profanadas y otras cosas espantosas que se presentan ante un tribunal. Hizo que Isabel se sintiera débil, tanto que, si hubiera tenido que hablar en ese momento, habría sido incapaz; pero no vio tal necesidad, pues estaba convencida de que no tenía absolutamente nada que decirle a madame Merle. No obstante, en las relaciones con esa dama nunca había necesidades absolutas; tenía una forma de desenvolverse que le permitía superar no solo sus propias deficiencias, sino también las de los demás. Sin embargo, ese día no parecía ser la misma; entró muy despacio detrás de la portera, e Isabel se dio cuenta enseguida de que no era muy probable que pudiese echar mano de sus habituales recursos. Para madame Merle la situación también era excepcional, y se había propuesto hacerle frente a la luz de las circunstancias. Eso le daba un aire de seriedad muy peculiar; ni siquiera intentó sonreír y, aunque Isabel vio más que nunca que estaba interpretando un papel, aun así le pareció que, en conjunto, aquella insólita mujer jamás había sido más ella misma. Madame Merle miró a su joven amiga de la cabeza a los pies, pero no de forma áspera o desafiante, sino más bien con fría amabilidad, y omitiendo cualquier alusión a su último encuentro. Era como si quisiera dejar bien clara la diferencia: en aquella ocasión había estado enojada, mientras que ahora se sentía del todo reconciliada.

—Nos puede dejar solas —dijo madame Merle a la portera—. Dentro de cinco minutos volverá a llamarla esta señora.

Y se giró hacia Isabel, la cual, tras haber observado esta escena se desentendió y dejó que su mirada vagase hasta donde permitían los límites de la habitación. No quería volver a posar nunca más sus ojos en madame Merle.

—Te sorprendes de encontrarme aquí, y me temo que no sea de tu agrado —dijo esa dama—. No entiendes por qué he venido; es como si me hubiera querido adelantar a ti. Reconozco que he actuado de forma bastante indiscreta, porque tendría que haberte pedido permiso primero. —No había ninguna ironía velada en sus palabras, sino que las dijo con sencillez y suavidad, pero Isabel, perdida en un mar de dudas y de dolor, tampoco habría podido aunque quisiera saber con qué intención las había dicho—. Pero no he estado mucho tiempo —continuó madame Merle—;

con Pansy, quiero decir. He venido a verla porque de pronto se me ocurrió esta tarde que debía de sentirse muy sola, e incluso un poco triste. Tal vez resulte bueno para una chica joven estar aquí, aunque tampoco lo puedo afirmar, ya que sé muy poco acerca de las jovencitas. De todos modos sí que es un poco deprimente, así que he venido… por si acaso. Por supuesto sabía que tú vendrías, y también su padre; pero no había oído nada de que estuvieran prohibidas otras visitas. Esa buena mujer… ¿cómo se llama…?, madame Catherine, no ha puesto ninguna objeción. He estado veinte minutos con Pansy. Tiene una habitación muy bonita, con piano y flores, que no parece en absoluto una celda de convento. La ha arreglado muy bien; tiene muy buen gusto. Ya sé que no es asunto mío, pero me siento mucho mejor después de haber visto a Pansy. Hasta puede tener doncella si quiere, aunque, claro, aquí no tiene necesidad de vestirse para ninguna ocasión. Lleva un sencillo vestido negro, y está encantadora. Después he ido a ver a la madre Catherine, que también tiene una habitación muy agradable. Te aseguro que no encuentro a estas pobres hermanas nada monásticas. La madre Catherine tiene un tocador muy coqueto, en el que había algo que hasta parecía un frasco de agua de colonia. Habla maravillas de Pansy, y dice que están encantadas de tenerla con ellas; que es una pequeña santa caída del cielo y un modelo para las niñas más mayores. Justo cuando ya iba a despedirme de madame Catherine, ha aparecido la portera para decirle que una señora quería ver a la signorina. Enseguida me he imaginado que serías tú, así que le he pedido que me dejara salir a recibirte en su lugar. He de decir que ha puesto muchos reparos y me ha dicho que tenía que informar antes a la madre superiora, ya que es muy importante que seas tratada con el máximo respeto. Entonces le he pedido que dejara tranquila a la madre superiora, y le he preguntado que cómo creía que te iba a tratar yo.

Así había seguido hablando madame Merle, mientras desplegaba buena parte de la brillantez propia de una mujer que hacía mucho tiempo que dominaba el arte de la conversación. Pero había ciertas fases y gradaciones en su discurso que no pasaron inadvertidas a los oídos de Isabel, por más que siguiera sin mirar a la otra a la cara. No pasó mucho tiempo sin que Isabel percibiera cómo se le quebraba levemente la voz, cómo se producían ciertos silencios en medio de la narración, lo cual parecía representar en sí mismo un auténtico drama. Esa sutil modulación indicaba un descubrimiento de suma importancia, la constatación de que había una actitud totalmente nueva y distinta por parte de su interlocutora. Madame Merle había adivinado en un instante que todo había acabado entre ellas, y al siguiente había adivinado la razón. La persona que tenía ante sí no era la misma que había tratado hasta ese momento, sino alguien muy diferente: una persona que conocía su secreto. El descubrimiento fue tremendo y, en cuanto lo hizo, aquella mujer con tan portentoso dominio de sí misma titubeó y perdió su valor. Sin embargo, aquello duró solo un momento. A continuación volvió a hacer acopio de su gran torrente de buenas maneras, que siguió fluyendo sin cortapisas hasta el final. Pero fue precisamente porque tenía ese final en vista por lo que pudo continuar. Se había visto afectada por algo que la hacía temblar, y necesitaba de toda su fuerza de voluntad para contener la agitación que sentía, ya que su única esperanza residía en evitar traicionarse. Lo consiguió, pero el deje de desconcierto en su voz se negó a mejorar, sin que pudiera hacer nada al respecto, mientras se oía hablar sin apenas saber lo que decía. La marea de su seguridad bajó y solo pudo deslizarse como pudo hasta llegar a puerto, arañando el casco de su nave contra el fondo.

Isabel vio todo eso con tanta nitidez como si se hubiera reflejado en un espejo grande y diáfano. Podría haber sido un gran momento para ella: podría haber sido su momento de gloria. El hecho de que madame Merle hubiese perdido el coraje y viera ante sí el fantasma de su secreto al descubierto era ya de por sí una gran venganza, casi una promesa de un futuro mejor. Y durante un momento, mientras parecía estar mirando por la ventana, casi dando la espalda a la otra, Isabel disfrutó sabiendo todo eso. Al otro lado de la ventana estaba el jardín del convento, pero no era eso lo que vio; no vio los brotes de las plantas ni el resplandor de la tarde. A la cruda luz de esa revelación, que ya se había convertido en parte de su experiencia y a la que la fragilidad de la nave en que le había sido ofrecida solo otorgaba un valor intrínseco, vio la pura y evidente verdad de que ella había sido utilizada como un mero instrumento, tan inconsciente y conveniente como una herramienta de madera y hierro. Volvió a crecer en ella toda la amargura de saberlo; era como si sintiese en los labios el regusto de la deshonra. Hubo un momento en el que, si se hubiera girado para hablar, habría dicho algo que habría silbado y restallado como un látigo. En su lugar, cerró los ojos y consiguió que esa odiosa visión desapareciese. Así consiguió que la mujer más inteligente del mundo, allí de pie a escasa distancia de ella, pareciera tan perdida y desorientada como la más insignificante de todas. La única venganza de Isabel consistió en permanecer en silencio… en dejar a madame Merle perdida en esa situación sin precedentes. La dejó allí durante un tiempo que debió de parecerle demasiado largo a la dama, ya que terminó por sentarse con un movimiento que de por sí era una confesión de total indefensión. Entonces Isabel se giró lentamente y la miró.

Madame Merle escrutaba muy pálida el rostro de Isabel. Que viera lo que quisiera… el peligro ya había pasado. Isabel nunca la acusaría de nada ni le reprocharía lo más mínimo, tal vez porque tampoco le daría jamás la oportunidad de defenderse.

—He venido a despedirme de Pansy —dijo nuestra joven al fin—. Me voy a Inglaterra esta noche.

—¿Que te vas a Inglaterra esta noche? —repitió madame Merle, mientras seguía sentada mirándola.

—Me voy a Gardencourt. Ralph Touchett se está muriendo.

—Ay, debes de estar muy afectada —dijo madame Merle recuperándose, ya que se le presentaba una oportunidad de expresar compasión—. ¿Te vas sola?

—Sí, sin mi marido.

Madame Merle emitió un vago murmullo, como una especie de reconocimiento de la tristeza que lo impregnaba todo.

—Nunca le he gustado al señor Touchett, pero lamento mucho que se esté muriendo. ¿Estará su madre allí?

—Sí, ha vuelto de Estados Unidos.

—Antes era muy amable conmigo, pero ha cambiado. También otros han cambiado —dijo madame Merle con un sereno y noble aire de patetismo. Luego hizo una pausa y añadió—: ¡Y volverás a ver de nuevo tu querido Gardencourt!

—No voy a tener ocasión de disfrutarlo mucho —respondió Isabel.

—Claro… en medio de tanto dolor. Pero, en fin, de todas las casas que conozco, y conozco muchas, es sin duda en la que más me gustaría vivir. No me atrevo a enviar un mensaje a la gente de allí —añadió madame Merle—, pero sí que me gustaría enviar todo mi amor al lugar.

Isabel se dio la vuelta.

—Voy a ver a Pansy. No tengo mucho tiempo.

Mientras miraba a su alrededor para encontrar la salida adecuada, la puerta se abrió para dejar entrar a una de las señoras de la casa, que avanzó con una discreta sonrisa en el rostro, al tiempo que se frotaba con suavidad sus manos rollizas y blancas bajo las largas y anchas mangas. Isabel reconoció en ella a madame Catherine, a la que ya conocía, y le rogó que la dejara ver de inmediato a la señorita Osmond. Madame Catherine pareció redoblar su discreción, sonrió suavemente y dijo:

—Le hará mucho bien verla a usted. Yo misma la acompaño.

Entonces dirigió su mirada complaciente y cautelosa a madame Merle.

—¿Puedo quedarme un poco? —preguntó esta—. Se está tan bien aquí…

—¡Puede quedarse para siempre, si lo desea! —contestó la buena hermana con una risa muy significativa.

Condujo a Isabel fuera de la estancia, luego recorrieron varios pasillos y subieron unas largas escaleras. Todos los lugares por los que pasaban parecían sólidos y austeros, iluminados y limpios; también lo son los grandes establecimientos penitenciarios, pensó Isabel. Madame Catherine empujó con suavidad la puerta de la habitación de Pansy e hizo pasar a su acompañante. La hermana permaneció sonriente con las manos entrelazadas mientras las otras dos se saludaban y abrazaban.

—Se alegra mucho de verla —repitió—. Le hará mucho bien.

Y dispuso la mejor silla con mucho cuidado para que se sentara Isabel. Pero la monja no hizo ademán de ir a sentarse también, y ya se disponía a retirarse.

—¿Cómo ve a nuestra querida niña? —preguntó a Isabel, demorándose un momento más.

—Está pálida —contestó aquella.

—Eso es por la alegría de verla. Es muy feliz. *Elle éclaire la maison* —dijo la hermana.

Tal y como había dicho madame Merle, Pansy llevaba un vestidito negro que tal vez fuese el causante de su palidez.

—Son muy buenas conmigo… ¡piensan en todo! —dijo la joven con su acostumbrada ansia por quedar bien.

—Pensamos en ti siempre… eres para nosotras una carga preciosa —comentó madame Catherine en el tono de una mujer para la que la benevolencia era un hábito, y cuyo concepto del deber consistía en la aceptación de todos los cuidados precisos.

Sus palabras cayeron como un plomo en los oídos de Isabel, ya que parecía representar la renuncia de la propia personalidad a la autoridad de la Iglesia.

Cuando madame Catherine las dejó solas, Pansy se arrodilló y escondió la cabeza en el regazo de su madrastra.

Permaneció así durante unos instantes mientras Isabel le acariciaba con ternura el pelo. Después se levantó, apartando el rostro y paseando la mirada por la habitación.

—¿No le parece que la he arreglado bien? Aquí dispongo de todo lo que tengo en casa.

—Es muy bonita, y me imagino que estarás cómoda. —Isabel apenas sabía qué decirle. Por un lado no podía dejar que creyera que había ido a compadecerse de ella, pero por otro sería una farsa absurda fingir que se alegraba de su situación, así que sencillamente añadió al cabo de un momento—: He venido a despedirme de ti. Me voy a Inglaterra.

El pequeño y blanco rostro de Pansy se sonrojó.

—¿A Inglaterra? ¿Para no volver?

—No sé cuándo volveré.

—Ah, lo siento —suspiró Pansy débilmente.

Habló como si no tuviera ningún derecho a criticar, pero su tono expresaba una profunda decepción.

—Mi primo, el señor Touchett, está muy enfermo. Lo más probable es que muera, y quiero verle antes —dijo Isabel.

—Sí, ya me dijo que moriría pronto. Claro que debe ir. ¿Va papá también?

—No, me voy sola.

Durante un momento la joven no dijo nada. Isabel se había preguntado a menudo qué pensaría de la relación de su padre con su esposa, pero nunca, ni siquiera con una mirada o el menor comentario, había dejado entrever Pansy que la considerara deficiente en lo que a intimidad se refería. Isabel estaba segura de que había reflexionado sobre el tema, y de que debía de haber llegado a la conclusión de que había maridos y mujeres mucho mejor avenidos, pero Pansy era discreta hasta de pensamiento, y jamás se habría atrevido a juzgar ni a su amable madrastra ni a su maravilloso padre. Su corazón se habría quedado tan paralizado como si de pronto hubiera visto a dos de los santos del gran cuadro que había en la capilla del convento girar sus cabezas pintadas y negar con ellas entre sí. Pero, al igual que en tal caso, y por la misma solemnidad del mismo, jamás habría mencionado que había presenciado tan terrible fenómeno, así que se callaba todo lo que sabía sobre los secretos de unas vidas que consideraba más importantes que la suya propia.

—Se va muy lejos —dijo Pansy al fin.

—Sí, muy lejos. Pero tampoco importa mucho —explicó Isabel—, ya que mientras estés aquí no podré estar a tu lado.

—Pero puede venir a verme, aunque no lo haya hecho mucho hasta ahora.

—No he venido porque tu padre me lo prohibió. Y hoy no traigo nada con lo que poder entretenerte.

—No hay que entretenerme. Eso no es lo que quiere papá.

—Entonces da igual que yo esté en Roma o en Inglaterra.

—No es usted feliz, señora Osmond —dijo Pansy.

—No, no mucho, pero qué más da.

—Eso mismo me digo yo. ¿Y qué más da? Pero me gustaría salir de aquí.

—Ojalá pudieras.

—No me deje aquí —dijo Pansy con suavidad.

Isabel permaneció callada durante un minuto mientras el corazón le latía muy deprisa.

—¿Vendrías conmigo ahora? —preguntó.

—¿Le ha dicho papá que me lleve?

—No, es una propuesta mía.

—Entonces creo que es mejor que espere. ¿No me envía papá ningún mensaje?

—No creo que sepa que he venido.

—Supongo que piensa que aún no he tenido bastante —dijo Pansy—, pero yo creo que sí. Las señoras son muy buenas conmigo, y las niñas vienen a verme. Algunas de las más pequeñas son encantadoras. Y mi habitación… bueno, ya lo ve usted misma. Está todo muy bien. Pero ya he tenido bastante. Papá quería que pensara un poco, y ya he pensado mucho.

—¿Y qué has pensado?

—Bueno, que nunca debo disgustar a papá.

—Eso ya lo sabías.

—Sí, pero ahora lo sé mejor. Haré lo que sea… lo que sea —dijo Pansy.

Entonces, al oír sus propias palabras, un intenso y puro rubor se adueñó de su rostro. Isabel interpretó el significado del mismo, y se dio cuenta de que la pobre chica había sido derrotada. ¡Menos mal que el señor Edward Rosier había conservado los esmaltes! Isabel la miró a los ojos y en ellos vio ante todo una súplica de que no la tratara con dureza. Posó su mano en la de Pansy, como si quisiera decirle que esa mirada suya no implicaba ninguna disminución de la estima que sentía por ella, ya que ese derrumbe momentáneo de la resistencia de la joven, pese a lo silencioso y modesto que había sido, solo parecía su tributo a la verdad de las cosas. Patsy nunca pretendía juzgar a los demás, pero sí que se había juzgado a sí misma y había visto la realidad. No tenía vocación para luchar contra las combinaciones de la adversidad, y había algo en la solemnidad de su encierro que la sobrecogía. Inclinaba su bonita cabeza ante la autoridad y solo le pedía a esta que fuese misericordiosa. Sí, menos mal que el señor Edward Rosier había conservado unos cuantos objetos.

Isabel se puso en pie, ya que su tiempo se estaba acabando.

—Bueno, entonces adiós. Me voy de Roma esta noche.

Pansy la cogió del vestido con un repentino cambio de expresión en el rostro.

—Está usted muy rara —dijo—. Me está asustando.

—Oh, tranquila, soy inofensiva —afirmó Isabel.

—Entonces, ¿puede que no vuelva?

—Puede que no. No lo sé seguro.

—¡Ay, señora Osmond, no me deje!

Isabel vio entonces que Pansy había caído en la cuenta de todo.

—Mi querida niña, ¿qué puedo hacer por ti?

—No lo sé… pero soy más feliz cuando pienso en usted.

—Puedes pensar en mí siempre que quieras.

—No si está tan lejos. Tengo un poco de miedo —dijo Pansy.

—¿De qué tienes miedo?

—De papá… un poco. Y de madame Merle. Acaba de venir.

—No debes decir esas cosas —la reconvino Isabel.

—Oh, haré todo cuanto quieran. Solo que, si está usted aquí, me será más fácil.

Isabel meditó unos instantes.

—No te pienso abandonar —dijo al fin—. Adiós, niña mía.

Entonces se fundieron durante un momento en un silencioso abrazo, como dos hermanas, y después Pansy la acompañó por el pasillo hasta las escaleras.

—Madame Merle ha estado aquí —repitió Pansy mientras iban caminando y, como Isabel no dijo nada, añadió de pronto—: No me gusta madame Merle.

Isabel vaciló unos instantes y se detuvo.

—No debes decir nunca que… que no te gusta madame Merle.

Pansy la miró asombrada, aunque para Pansy el asombro nunca había sido razón para desobedecer.

—No lo volveré a hacer —dijo con exquisita mansedumbre.

Tenían que separarse en las escaleras, ya que al parecer parte de la suave pero estricta disciplina bajo la que vivía Pansy consistía en que no las bajase. Isabel descendió por ellas y, cuando llegó al final, miró y vio que la joven seguía arriba.

—¿Volverá? —le dijo esta con una voz que después Isabel recordaría muchas veces.

—Sí… volveré.

Madame Catherine se reunió abajo con la señora Osmond y la condujo de nuevo hasta la sala. En la puerta se quedaron hablando un momento.

—Yo no entro —dijo la hermana—. Madame Merle la está esperando.

Isabel se puso tensa al oír ese anuncio. Casi estuvo a punto de preguntar si no había otra forma de salir del convento, pero tras reflexionar un instante se convenció de que sería mejor que no revelara a aquella estimable monja su deseo de evitar a la otra amiga de Pansy. Su acompañante la cogió del brazo con mucha suavidad y, mirándola fijamente durante un momento con sus sabios y benevolentes ojos, le dijo en francés en un tono casi familiar:

—*Eh bien, chère madame, qu'en pensez-vous?*

—¿De mi hijastra? Bueno, tardaría mucho en explicárselo.

—Nosotras creemos que ya es suficiente —afirmó madame Catherine con toda claridad, y luego abrió la puerta de la sala.

Madame Merle estaba sentada igual que cuando Isabel la había dejado, como una mujer tan absorta en sus pensamientos que ni siquiera había movido un solo dedo. Una vez que madame Catherine hubo cerrado la puerta, la dama se puso en pie, e Isabel se percató de que había estado pensando en algo concreto. Había recuperado la serenidad y volvía a estar en plena posesión de todos sus recursos.

—Pensé que debería esperarte —dijo con extremada cortesía—, pero no es para hablar de Pansy.

Isabel se preguntó de qué querría hablar, y pese a tal declaración respondió al cabo de un momento:

—Madame Catherine dice que ya es suficiente.

—Sí, a mí también me lo parece. Pero quería preguntarte sobre el pobre señor Touchett —añadió madame Merle—. ¿Tienes razones para creer que de verdad está en las últimas?

—La única información que tengo es un telegrama, que lamentablemente solo confirma esa posibilidad.

—Te voy a hacer una pregunta muy extraña —dijo madame Merle—. ¿Aprecias mucho a tu primo?

Y le dedicó una sonrisa tan extraña como sus palabras.

—Sí, lo aprecio mucho, pero no entiendo lo que quieres decir.

Madame Merle esperó un momento.

—Es difícil de explicar. Se me ha ocurrido algo que tal vez no se te haya ocurrido nunca, y quiero compartir contigo el beneficio de mi idea. Tu primo te hizo en una ocasión un gran favor. ¿Has reparado en ello alguna vez?

—Me ha hecho muchos favores.

—Sí, pero sobre todo uno mucho más importante que todos los demás. Te hizo una mujer rica.

—¿Que él me hizo…?

Madame Merle, ante el éxito de sus palabras, continuó hablando en tono más triunfal:

—Te concedió ese lustre adicional que necesitabas para ser un gran partido. En el fondo, es a él a quien se lo tienes que agradecer.

Se detuvo al observar algo en la mirada de Isabel.

—No te entiendo. El dinero era de mi tío.

—Sí, el dinero era de tu tío, pero la idea fue de tu primo. Él convenció a su padre. ¡Ay querida, era una suma muy grande!

Isabel se quedó mirándola fijamente; ese día parecía vivir en un mundo iluminado por fogonazos cegadores.

—No entiendo por qué dices esas cosas, ni sé qué es lo que sabes de verdad.

—Lo único que sé es lo que supongo. Y eso es lo que he supuesto.

Isabel se dirigió a la puerta y, tras abrirla, se quedó un momento inmóvil con la mano en el pasador. Entonces dijo, en lo que fue su única venganza:

—Creía que era a ti a quien tenía que dar las gracias.

Madame Merle bajó la mirada y permaneció así, en una especie de orgullosa penitencia.

—Eres muy desdichada, lo sé. Pero yo lo soy aún más —dijo.

—Sí, te creo. Y también creo que no quiero volver a verte nunca más.

Madame Merle alzó la mirada.

—Me iré a Estados Unidos —afirmó en voz baja mientras Isabel salía de la habitación.

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No fue con sorpresa, sino con una sensación que en otras circunstancias se habría parecido mucho a la alegría, con lo que, al descender del tren correo de París en Charing Cross, Isabel cayó, si no en brazos, cuando menos en las manos de Henrietta Stackpole. Había telegrafiado a su amiga desde Turín y, aunque no estaba totalmente convencida de que Henrietta fuera a recibirla, había intuido que su telegrama produciría algún resultado útil. Durante su largo viaje desde Roma su mente se había entregado a vaguedades, pues había sido incapaz de pensar seriamente en el futuro. Había realizado el viaje sin que sus ojos vieran nada y sin obtener mucho placer de los países que iba atravesando, pese a estar engalanados con la exuberante lozanía de la primavera. Sus pensamientos parecían transitar a lo largo de otros países, extrañas tierras poco iluminadas y sin senderos en las que al parecer no había cambios de estaciones, sino tan solo un perpetuo y terrible invierno. Tenía mucho en lo que pensar, pero no eran ni sus reflexiones ni ningún propósito consciente lo que ocupaba su mente. Por ella pasaban imágenes inconexas, así como repentinos y tristes destellos de recuerdos y expectativas. El pasado y el futuro iban y venían a su antojo, pero ella solo los veía en imágenes intermitentes que surgían y desaparecían siguiendo su propia lógica. Era extraordinario todo lo que podía recordar. Ahora que conocía el secreto, ahora que sabía algo que tanto la concernía y cuyo eclipse había hecho que la vida le pareciese un intento de jugar al whist con una baraja incompleta, la verdad de las cosas, las relaciones mutuas entre estas, su significado y, en buena parte, su horror, surgieron ante ella con una especie de grandiosidad arquitectónica. Recordaba infinidad de minucias que cobraban vida con la espontaneidad de un escalofrío. En su momento le habían parecido minucias, pero ahora veía que tenían gran importancia. Y sin embargo, incluso ahora, no dejaban de ser minucias, pues tampoco le servía de nada comprenderlas. Ya nada parecía serle de utilidad. Todo propósito o intención estaba anulado, así como todo deseo, salvo el de llegar a su anhelado refugio. Gardencourt había sido el punto de partida, y regresar a esas silenciosas estancias supondría al menos una solución temporal. Había salido de allí en plenitud de sus fuerzas, y ahora volvía con toda su debilidad; si antes había sido un lugar de descanso, ahora sería un santuario. Envidió a Ralph que se estuviese muriendo, porque si uno quería descansar, no había otra forma más perfecta de hacerlo. Acabar por completo, abandonarlo todo y no saber nada más… era una idea tan dulce como la visión de un baño frío en una bañera de mármol, en una habitación a oscuras, en una tierra ardiente.

De hecho, durante el viaje desde Roma hubo momentos en los que prácticamente fue como estar muerta. Permanecía sentada en su rincón, inmóvil, pasiva, tan solo dejándose llevar, y tan distanciada de cualquier esperanza o lamentación que se recordó a una de esas figuras etruscas reclinadas sobre el receptáculo de sus cenizas. Ya no había nada que lamentar, eso ya había terminado. No solo el momento de cometer locuras, sino también el de arrepentirse, habían quedado atrás. Lo único de lo que se lamentaba era de que madame Merle hubiera sido tan… bueno, algo tan inimaginable. Justo en ese momento su inteligencia flaqueó, ante su total incapacidad para definir qué era lo que había sido madame Merle. De todas formas, fuera lo que fuese, era la propia madame Merle quien tenía que lamentarlo, y sin duda lo haría en Estados Unidos, adonde había anunciado que pensaba marcharse. Ya no era asunto de Isabel, que solo tenía la sensación de que no volvería a verla nunca. Esa sensación la transportó hacia el futuro, del que de vez en cuando vislumbraba atisbos entrecortados. Se vio a sí misma, al cabo de muchos años, todavía con la misma actitud de una mujer que tenía que vivir la vida, lo cual contradecía lo que sentía en esos momentos. Tal vez lo mejor fuera irse lejos, muy lejos, mucho más allá de la pequeña, verde y gris Inglaterra, pero era evidente que ese privilegio le sería denegado. En lo más profundo de su alma, más profunda que cualquier deseo de renuncia, latía la sensación de que de ahora en adelante la vida sería su principal ocupación durante mucho tiempo. Y había momentos en que dicha convicción tenía algo de acicate, resultaba casi vivificadora. Era una demostración de fuerza, de que algún día volvería a ser feliz. No podía ser que solo viviera para sufrir; al fin y al cabo aún era joven, y todavía podían pasarle muchas cosas. Se consideraba demasiado valiosa y capacitada como para vivir solo para sufrir, solo para ver cómo las heridas de la vida se iban repitiendo y haciendo más grandes. Entonces se preguntó si no sería vanidoso y estúpido tener tan buen concepto de sí misma. ¿Acaso no estaba llena la historia de ejemplos de destrucción de lo valioso? ¿No era mucho más probable que uno sufriera si de verdad tenía alguna valía?

¿Cuándo había ofrecido alguna garantía ser alguien valioso? Eso implicaría admitir la existencia en uno mismo de cierta vulgaridad; e Isabel reconoció, al pasar ante sus ojos, la rápida y vaga sombra de un largo futuro. Nunca escaparía: tendría que perdurar hasta el fin. Entonces los años recientes volvieron a envolverla y el gris telón de su indiferencia cayó sobre ella.

Henrietta la besó como solía besar Henrietta, como si le diera miedo de que la sorprendieran haciéndolo; y luego Isabel permaneció allí entre la multitud, mirando a su alrededor, intentando localizar a su sirvienta. No preguntó nada; solo quería esperar. Tuvo la repentina sensación de que iba a necesitar ayuda. Se alegró de que Henrietta hubiese ido a recibirla, pues siempre había algo terrible en el hecho de llegar a Londres. La arqueada bóveda oscura y llena de humo de la estación, la extraña y lívida luz, la densa y turbia multitud que no dejaba de dar empujones… todo aquello la llenó de un miedo nervioso que hizo que se cogiera del brazo de su amiga. Recordó que antes le gustaban todas esas cosas, porque parecían formar parte de un impresionante espectáculo en el que había algo que la conmovía. Recordó un anochecer de invierno, cinco años atrás, en que había ido caminando desde Euston por las bulliciosas calles. Ahora no podría hacerlo, e incluso rememoró el incidente como si se tratase de la proeza de otra persona.

—¡Es estupendo que hayas venido! —dijo Henrietta, mirándola al mismo tiempo como si pensara que Isabel podría estar dispuesta a rebatir esa afirmación—. Si no hubieses venido… si no hubieses venido… la verdad, no sé… —añadió la señorita Stackpole, en lo que era una ominosa alusión a su gran capacidad de reprobación.

Isabel volvió a mirar a su alrededor, pero no vio a su doncella. En su lugar, posó la mirada en otra figura que le dio la impresión que ya conocía de antes, y al instante reconoció el afable rostro del señor Bantling. Estaba un poco apartado, y la multitud que se agolpaba a su alrededor jamás conseguiría moverlo ni un milímetro del terreno que había ganado para retirarse con discreción mientras las dos damas se saludaban.

—Ahí está el señor Bantling —dijo Isabel en un tono suave, como sin darle importancia, sin que le preocupara ya mucho encontrar o no a su doncella.

—Sí, me acompaña a todas partes. Acérquese, señor Bantling —le dijo Henrietta, tras lo que el galante soltero se aproximó sonriente… con una sonrisa, no obstante, atenuada por la gravedad de la ocasión—. ¿Verdad que es estupendo que Isabel haya venido? —le preguntó Henrietta—. Está al corriente de todo —añadió dirigiéndose a su amiga—. Incluso tuvimos una fuerte discusión. Él decía que no vendrías, y yo decía que sí.

—Creía que siempre estaban de acuerdo en todo —dijo Isabel, devolviendo la sonrisa al señor Bantling.

Se sentía con fuerzas para sonreír en esos momentos, porque de pronto había visto la franca mirada de aquel hombre que tenía buenas noticias que darle. Sus ojos parecían decirle que no quería que olvidase que era un viejo amigo de su primo: que sabía lo que pasaba y que todo estaba bien. Isabel le dio la mano y, de forma un tanto extravagante, pensó que era un apuesto e intachable caballero.

—Bueno, yo siempre estoy de acuerdo —dijo el señor Bantling—, pero ella no.

—¿No te dije que una doncella era un incordio? —dijo Henrietta—. Lo más seguro es que la tuya se haya quedado en Calais.

—Me da igual —dijo Isabel sin dejar de mirar al señor Bantling, que nunca le había parecido tan interesante.

—Quédate con ella mientras voy a ver —ordenó Henrietta antes de dejarlos solos un momento.

Al principio se quedaron en silencio, y luego el señor Bantling preguntó a Isabel cómo había ido la travesía del Canal.

—Muy bien. No, creo que ha sido bastante dura —contestó esta ante la obvia sorpresa de su acompañante. Después añadió—: Ya sé que ha estado usted en Gardencourt.

—¿Y cómo lo sabe?

—No se lo sabría decir. Es que tiene usted aspecto de alguien que ha estado en Gardencourt.

—¿Cree que se me ve muy triste? Allí es todo muy triste, como ya sabe.

—Usted nunca parece muy triste, sino muy amable —dijo Isabel con una franqueza que no le costó ningún esfuerzo; tenía la impresión de que en adelante nunca volvería a sentir ningún tipo de vergüenza superficial.

El pobre señor Bantling, sin embargo, todavía se hallaba en ese estadio inferior. Se sonrojó mucho, se rió y le aseguró que con frecuencia se entristecía, y entonces se ponía furibundo.

—Y si no, pregúntele a la señorita Stackpole. Sí, estuve hace dos días en Gardencourt.

—¿Vio a mi primo?

—Solo un momento. Pero había estado recibiendo a gente. Warburton había ido el día anterior. Ralph era el mismo

de siempre, salvo que estaba en cama, parecía muy enfermo y no podía hablar —continuó el señor Bantling—. Aun así, estaba muy alegre y divertido, y tan lúcido como siempre. Es una lástima.

Incluso en aquella bulliciosa y abarrotada estación, esa sencilla descripción resultaba muy vívida.

—¿Fue a última hora del día?

—Sí, fui a esa hora a propósito. Hemos pensado que a usted le gustaría saberlo.

—Le estoy muy agradecida. ¿Cree que podré ir esta noche?

—No creo que Henrietta le deje —dijo el señor Bantling—. Quiere que se quede con ella esta noche. Le hice prometer al sirviente de Touchett que me telegrafiaría hoy, y hace una hora recibí el telegrama en mi club. «Tranquilo y relajado», eso es lo que decía, y había sido enviado a las dos. Así que puede esperar hasta mañana. Debe de estar muy cansada.

—Sí, estoy muy cansada. Y se lo agradezco de nuevo.

—Bueno, estábamos seguros de que le gustarían esas últimas noticias.

Isabel comentó vagamente que, después de todo, Henrietta y él sí que parecían estar de acuerdo en todo. La señorita Stackpole volvió con la doncella de Isabel, a la que había encontrado demostrando que sí era de utilidad. La buena mujer, en lugar de perderse entre la multitud, se había dedicado simplemente a encargarse del equipaje de su señora, con lo cual esta ya era libre para salir de la estación.

—Espero que no estés pensando en ir al campo esta noche —le dijo Henrietta—. Me da igual que haya un tren o no. Te vas a venir conmigo a Wimpole Street. No queda un sitio libre donde alojarse en Londres, pero aun así yo tengo uno para ti. No es un palacio romano, pero servirá para una noche.

—Haré lo que tú quieras —dijo Isabel.

—Pues vas a venir conmigo y me vas a contestar a unas cuantas preguntas. Eso es lo que quiero.

—¿Se da cuenta de que no ha dicho nada de cenar, señora Osmond? —bromeó el señor Bantling.

Henrietta fijó su mirada especulativa en él durante un momento.

—Ya veo que tienes mucha prisa por irte a cenar. Recuerda que tienes que estar en la estación de Paddington mañana a las diez.

—No lo haga por mí, señor Bantling —le dijo Isabel.

—No, lo hará por mí —afirmó Henrietta mientras hacía subir a su amiga en un coche de alquiler.

Y más tarde, en una sala grande y oscura de Wimpole Street (donde, para ser justos con ella, hemos de decir que había habido cena de sobra), comenzó a hacerle esas preguntas a las que había aludido en la estación:

—¿Te montó tu marido una escena por querer venir?

Esa fue la primera indagación de la señorita Stackpole.

—No, no puedo decir que hiciera ninguna escena.

—Entonces, ¿no se opuso?

—Sí, se opuso mucho, pero tampoco puede decirse que fuera ninguna escena.

—¿Qué fue entonces?

—Fue una conversación muy calmada.

Henrietta contempló a su invitada un instante.

—Tuvo que ser un infierno —comentó.

E Isabel no negó que lo hubiera sido, pero solo se ciñó a contestar las preguntas de Henrietta, lo cual fue fácil ya que eran bastante concretas. De momento prefería no darle ninguna información adicional.

—Bueno —dijo la señorita Stackpole al final—, solo tengo una crítica que hacerte. No sé por qué le prometiste a la señorita Osmond que volverías.

—Yo tampoco lo sé muy bien ahora —contestó Isabel—, pero en ese momento sí que lo sabía.

—Si has olvidado la razón, es posible que no vuelvas.

Isabel tardó un poco en responder.

—Tal vez encuentre otra.

—Nunca encontrarás una que sea buena.

—A falta de otra mejor, la promesa que le hice servirá —dijo Isabel.

—Sí, y por eso me parece tan odiosa.

—No hables de eso ahora. Aún falta algún tiempo para que suceda. Si venir fue tan complicado, ¿cómo será volver?

—Bueno, recuerda que, al menos, ¡no te montará ninguna escena! —dijo Henrietta de forma muy deliberada.

—Sí que lo hará —replicó Isabel en tono muy serio—. Aunque no será una escena de un momento, sino para el resto de mi vida.

Durante unos minutos las dos mujeres permanecieron calladas, considerando la perspectiva de ese resto, y entonces la señorita Stackpole, para cambiar de tema tal y como Isabel había pedido, anunció súbitamente:

—Pasé unos días en casa de lady Pensil.

—¡Ah, al fin llegó la invitación!

—Sí, tardó cinco años. Pero en esta ocasión sí quería verme.

—Lo cual es muy normal.

—Más normal de lo que creo que imaginas —dijo Henrietta con la mirada fija en algún punto lejano. Y entonces añadió, girándose de pronto hacia su amiga—: Isabel Archer, te ruego que me perdones. ¿No sabes por qué? Pues porque te critiqué en su momento y, sin embargo, yo he terminado yendo más lejos que tú. Al menos el señor Osmond nació allá.

Isabel tardó un momento en entender lo que le estaba diciendo, ya que el significado de sus palabras estaba disimulado con mucha modestia o, cuando menos, con mucho ingenio. En esos momentos a la mente de Isabel le costaba captar el lado cómico de las cosas, pero aun así recibió con una breve risa la noticia que le acababa de dar su interlocutora. No obstante, se controló de inmediato y dijo con el punto justo de emoción:

—Henrietta Stackpole, ¿me estás diciendo que vas a abandonar tu país?

—Sí, mi pobre Isabel, eso voy a hacer. Sería absurdo negarlo, y debo afrontar las cosas sin tapujos. Voy a casarme con el señor Bantling y a establecerme aquí en Londres.

—Me resulta tan extraño… —dijo Isabel con una sonrisa.

—Sí, supongo que lo es. He llegado a esa decisión poco a poco. Creo que sé lo que estoy haciendo, pero no creo que pueda explicarlo.

—Uno no puede explicar su matrimonio —contestó Isabel—. Y además el tuyo no necesita explicaciones. El señor Bantling no es ningún enigma.

—No, no es ningún chiste malo… ni siquiera una alta manifestación de humor estadounidense. Es una bellísima persona —continuó Henrietta—. Llevo muchos años estudiándolo y lo conozco muy bien. Es tan claro como el estilo de un buen prospecto. No es un intelectual, pero aprecia el intelecto. Por otra parte, tampoco exagera la importancia del mismo, algo que creo que hacemos a veces en Estados Unidos.

—Desde luego has cambiado —dijo Isabel—. Es la primera vez que te oigo decir algo en contra de tu país natal.

—Solo digo que estamos demasiado obnubilados ante la mera fuerza del intelecto, lo cual tampoco es que sea un defecto vulgar. Pero sí que he cambiado; una mujer tiene que cambiar mucho para casarse.

—Espero que seas muy feliz. Al fin vas a conocer, y además aquí, lo que es la vida íntima.

Henrietta emitió un suspiro muy expresivo.

—Supongo que esa es la clave del misterio. Ya no soportaba permanecer siempre al margen. Ahora tengo tanto derecho como cualquiera —añadió con inocente júbilo.

Isabel compartía la euforia de su amiga en su justa medida, pero en su punto de vista había cierta melancolía. Al final Henrietta había terminado reconociendo que era humana y femenina; Henrietta, a la que hasta entonces siempre había considerado una ligera e intensa llama, una voz incorpórea. Resultaba algo decepcionante descubrir que tenía sus propias susceptibilidades, que también la afectaban las pasiones comunes, y que su intimidad con el señor Bantling no era del todo original. Había cierta falta de originalidad en el hecho de que fuera a casarse con él… incluso una especie de estupidez; y por unos instantes la sordidez del mundo adquirió tintes más sombríos para Isabel. Al poco se dijo que, por lo menos, el propio señor Bantling era bastante original, pero seguía sin entender que Henrietta pudiera renunciar a su país. Ella misma lo había descuidado mucho, aunque nunca había representado para Isabel tanto como para Henrietta. A continuación, le preguntó si lo había pasado bien durante su estancia con lady Pensil.

—Sí, mucho —contestó Henrietta—. La pobre no sabía qué pensar de mí.

—¿Y eso es motivo de diversión?

—Mucho, porque se supone que ella es una mujer de gran intelecto. Cree que lo sabe todo, pero es incapaz de entender a una mujer moderna de mi clase. Le resultaría mucho más fácil si yo fuera un poco mejor o un poco peor. La pobre está totalmente desconcertada. Creo que piensa que me siento obligada a hacer algo inmoral, y para ella es una inmoralidad que me case con su hermano; pero tampoco resulta lo bastante inmoral. Y nunca conseguirá

entender mi mezcolanza… ¡nunca!

—Entonces es menos inteligente que su hermano —dijo Isabel—, porque él sí que parece haberla entendido.

—¡Qué va, en absoluto! —exclamó la señorita Stackpole con decisión—. Estoy convencida de que esa es la única razón por la que quiere casarse conmigo: para resolver el misterio y las verdaderas dimensiones del mismo. Es como una idea fija… una especie de fascinación.

—Está muy bien que te lo tomes con tan buen humor.

—Bueno —dijo Henrietta—, ¡es que yo también tengo algo que resolver!

Y entonces Isabel comprendió que su amiga no había renunciado a sus lealtades, sino que planeaba un ataque. Por fin se disponía a enfrentarse en serio con Inglaterra.

No obstante, a la mañana siguiente, cuando se encontró a las diez en la estación de Paddington en compañía de la señorita Stackpole y del señor Bantling, Isabel también comprendió que el caballero en cuestión llevaba sus perplejidades bastante bien. En el caso de que aún no lo hubiera averiguado todo, al menos sí que había hecho el descubrimiento más importante: que a la señorita Stackpole no le iba a faltar iniciativa. Era evidente que, a la hora de elegir esposa, había querido evitar esa deficiencia.

—Henrietta ya me ha puesto al corriente, y me alegro mucho —le dijo Isabel al darle la mano.

—Supongo que le parecerá muy extraño —contestó el señor Bantling, apoyándose en su fino paraguas.

—Sí, me parece muy extraño.

—Seguro que no tanto como a mí. Pero siempre me ha gustado marcarme metas —dijo él con serenidad.

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En esa segunda ocasión, la llegada de Isabel a Gardencourt fue incluso más discreta de lo que había sido la primera. Ralph Touchett mantenía un servicio muy reducido, y para los nuevos criados la señora Osmond era una desconocida; de manera que, en vez de conducirla a sus aposentos la hicieron pasar con cierta frialdad al salón para que esperara allí mientras subían a anunciar su llegada a su tía. Esperó mucho tiempo; la señora Touchett no parecía tener prisa en bajar a recibirla. Terminó por impacientarse, por ponerse nerviosa y asustarse… como si los objetos que la rodeaban se hubieran transformado en seres conscientes que observaban su inquietud haciendo muecas grotescas. El día era oscuro y frío; la penumbra se espesaba en los rincones de las amplias y sombrías habitaciones. La casa estaba totalmente silenciosa, un silencio que Isabel recordaba muy bien, pues era el mismo que había impregnado todo el lugar durante los días previos a la muerte de su tío. Salió del salón y deambuló por las estancias; entró en la biblioteca y recorrió la galería de pinturas, donde el eco de sus pasos resonó en medio de aquel profundo silencio. No había cambiado nada; lo reconoció todo tal y como lo había visto años atrás, e incluso se sintió como si fuera ayer mismo cuando había estado allí por última vez. Envidiaba la seguridad de aquellas piezas valiosas que no cambiaban en lo más mínimo, que solo aumentaban en valor, mientras sus propietarios iban perdiendo poco a poco la juventud, la felicidad y la belleza, y se percató de que estaba deambulando por el lugar del mismo modo en que lo hiciera su tía el día en que fue a verla en Albany. Isabel había cambiado mucho desde entonces… aquello solo había sido el principio. De pronto cayó en la cuenta de que si su tía Lydia no se hubiese presentado aquel día de aquella manera y no la hubiese encontrado sola, todo podría haber sido muy distinto. Tal vez habría tenido otra vida y habría sido una mujer más dichosa. En la galería se detuvo ante un pequeño cuadro, un encantador y valioso Bonington en el que posó la mirada durante largo tiempo. Pero no lo estaba contemplando; se estaba preguntando si, de no haber ido a verla su tía a Albany aquel día, se habría casado con Caspar Goodwood.

La señora Touchett apareció al fin, justo después de que Isabel hubiese vuelto al vasto y desolado salón. Parecía haber envejecido mucho, pero su mirada era tan vivaz como siempre y tenía la cabeza igual de erguida, mientras que sus finos labios parecían ser los guardianes de sus pensamientos latentes. Llevaba un vestido gris muy sencillo que hizo que Isabel se preguntara, tal y como había hecho la primera vez, si su distinguida pariente se parecía más a una reina regente o a la matrona de una prisión. Isabel sintió los labios de su tía más finos que nunca cuando tocaron sus ardientes mejillas.

—Te he tenido esperando porque estaba haciéndole compañía a Ralph —dijo la señora Touchett—. La enfermera se ha ido a almorzar y la he sustituido. Tiene un criado que se supone que lo cuida, pero no sirve para nada. Siempre está mirando por la ventana… ¡como si hubiera algo que ver! No he querido moverme porque parecía que Ralph estaba durmiendo y me ha dado miedo despertarlo con el ruido, así que me he esperado hasta que volviese la enfermera. Además, he recordado que ya conocías la casa.

—Y he comprobado que la conozco mejor de lo que creía. He estado dando vueltas por todas partes —explicó Isabel, que a continuación le preguntó si Ralph dormía mucho.

—Permanece con los ojos cerrados y sin moverse, pero no estoy segura de que siempre esté durmiendo.

—¿Me verá? ¿Podrá hablarme?

La señora Touchett declinó comprometerse en su respuesta.

—Puedes intentarlo —fue el límite de su locuacidad. Luego se ofreció a acompañar a Isabel a la habitación en que se alojaría—: Creía que te habrían llevado ya, pero claro, esta no es mi casa, sino de Ralph, y no sé lo que hacen o dejan de hacer. Espero que al menos se hayan encargado de tu equipaje. No creo que hayas traído mucho, aunque tampoco es que sea de mi incumbencia. Creo que te han asignado la misma habitación que ocupaste la otra vez. Cuando Ralph supo que venías, dijo que tenías que alojarte en esa.

—¿Y dijo algo más?

—Ay, querida, ya no charla tanto como solía —dijo la señora Touchett mientras precedía a su sobrina por las escaleras.

Era la misma habitación, e Isabel tuvo la impresión de que nadie había dormido en ella desde que la había ocupado

por última vez. Su equipaje estaba allí y, en efecto, no era voluminoso. La señora Touchett se sentó un momento mientras lo contemplaba.

—¿De verdad no hay esperanzas? —le preguntó nuestra joven amiga, de pie ante ella.

—Ninguna en absoluto. Nunca las ha habido. No ha sido una vida muy satisfactoria que digamos.

—No, solo ha sido una vida hermosa.

Isabel se dio cuenta de que ya estaba contradiciendo a su tía, cuya sequedad la exasperaba.

—No sé qué quieres decir con eso. No hay belleza sin salud. Llevas un vestido muy raro para viajar.

Isabel echó un rápido vistazo a su atuendo.

—Salí de Roma a toda prisa, y me puse lo primero que encontré.

—Tus hermanas, en Estados Unidos, querían saber cómo vestías. Ese parecía ser su principal interés. No pude decírselo, pero por lo visto ellas ya se habían hecho una idea acertada: que nunca llevas nada que no sea brocado negro.

—Me creen más distinguida de lo que soy; me da miedo decirles la verdad —dijo Isabel—. Lily me contó en una carta que había cenado usted con ella.

—Me invitó cuatro veces, y al final no tuve más remedio que aceptar. Después de la segunda invitación tendría que haberme dejado en paz. La cena estuvo muy bien, y debió de costarle muy cara. Su marido tiene unos modales espantosos. ¿Que si disfruté de mi visita a Estados Unidos? ¿Y por qué tendría que disfrutarla? No fui allí por placer.

Eran unos temas de conversación muy interesantes, pero la señora Touchett dejó enseguida a su sobrina; volverían a reunirse al cabo de media hora para comer. Para dicho almuerzo ambas damas se sentaron una frente a la otra a una pequeña mesa del melancólico comedor. Al poco, Isabel se dio cuenta de que su tía no era tan seca como parecía, y volvió a sentir la misma compasión de antes por la inexpresividad de aquella pobre mujer, por su falta de lamentaciones y decepciones. Estaba claro que ese día habría sido para ella una bendición poder experimentar algún sentimiento de derrota, de error, incluso uno o dos motivos de vergüenza. Isabel se preguntó si no echaría de menos incluso esos enriquecimientos del espíritu y estaría intentando en privado… alcanzar como un regusto de vida, las migajas del banquete; el testimonio del dolor o el frío solaz del remordimiento. Por otro lado, quizá tuviese miedo porque, si comenzase a esas alturas a saber lo que era el remordimiento, tal vez ese descubrimiento la llevara demasiado lejos. No obstante, Isabel notó que su tía había intuido vagamente que se había perdido algo importante, y se veía en el futuro como una anciana sin recuerdos. Su pequeño y afilado rostro ofrecía un aspecto trágico. Le hizo saber a su sobrina que Ralph aún no se había movido, pero que probablemente podría verla antes de la cena. Y al momento añadió que Ralph había recibido a lord Warburton el día anterior, un anuncio que la sobresaltó ligeramente, ya que era una indicación de que aquel personaje se encontraba en las cercanías y cualquier accidente podría volver a reunirlos. No se trataría de un encuentro grato. Isabel no había ido a Inglaterra para tener que vérselas de nuevo con lord Warburton. No obstante, le dijo a su tía que este se había portado muy bien con Ralph, como ella misma había podido comprobar en Roma.

—Ahora tiene algo más en lo que pensar —contestó la señora Touchett, e hizo una pausa, mientras dirigía a su sobrina una mirada penetrante como una barrena.

Isabel comprendió que su tía quería decirle algo con esas palabras, y enseguida se imaginó de qué se trataba. Pero su contestación no reveló lo que había supuesto; el corazón le latía muy deprisa y quería ganar algún tiempo.

—Ah, ya… la Cámara de los Lores y demás.

—No está pensando en los lores, sino en las damas. Bueno, al menos en una. Le dijo a Ralph que va a casarse.

—¡Ah, va a casarse! —exclamó Isabel con suavidad.

—Si no rompe antes el compromiso. Al parecer pensó que a Ralph le gustaría saberlo. El pobre no podrá ir a la boda, claro, aunque creo que va a ser muy pronto.

—¿Y quién es la dama en cuestión?

—Un miembro de la aristocracia. Lady Flora, o lady Felicia… algo así.

—Me alegro mucho —dijo Isabel—. Debe de haber sido una decisión muy repentina.

—Bastante, creo; un noviazgo de solo tres semanas. Acaban de hacerlo público.

—Me alegro mucho —repitió Isabel con mayor énfasis. Sabía que su tía la estaba observando en busca de alguna señal de amargura, y fue el deseo de evitar que pudiera percibir nada de eso lo que le permitió adoptar rápidamente un tono de satisfacción, casi de alivio. Por supuesto, la señora Touchett se ceñía a la tradición según la cual toda dama, incluso las casadas, consideran el matrimonio de sus antiguos pretendientes como una ofensa a ellas. Así pues,

la primera preocupación de Isabel fue demostrar que, por mucho que eso pudiera ocurrir en general, ella no se sentía ofendida. Pero mientras tanto, como digo, el corazón le latía con fuerza; y si permaneció en actitud pensativa unos instantes, durante los cuales se olvidó incluso de la observación escrutadora de la señora Touchett, no fue porque hubiese perdido un admirador. Su mente había atravesado media Europa hasta detenerse, jadeante e incluso algo temblorosa, en la ciudad de Roma. Se imaginó comunicándole a su marido que lord Warburton iba a llevar a una novia ante el altar, sin ser consciente de la extrema palidez de su aspecto al realizar semejante esfuerzo intelectual. No obstante, al final consiguió calmarse y dijo a su tía—: Estaba claro que antes o después tenía que hacerlo.

La señora Touchett permaneció en silencio, tras lo cual hizo un pequeño y rápido movimiento de negación con la cabeza.

—¡Ay, querida mía, no te entiendo! —exclamó de repente.

Siguieron comiendo sin decir nada, mientras Isabel se sentía como si se hubiera enterado de que lord Warburton había muerto. Solo lo había conocido como pretendiente, y ahora eso ya había acabado. También había muerto para la pobre Pansy; a través de ella, podría haber seguido vivo para Isabel. Había un sirviente en la estancia, y la señora Touchett le pidió que las dejara solas. Ella ya había terminado de comer y estaba sentada con las manos juntas sobre el borde de la mesa.

—Quiero hacerte tres preguntas —dijo cuando el sirviente se retiró.

—Tres son muchas preguntas.

—No pueden ser menos, ya lo he pensado bien. Y las tres son realmente buenas.

—Eso es lo que más miedo me da. Las mejores preguntas son siempre las peores —contestó Isabel.

La señora Touchett había echado su silla hacia atrás y, cuando su sobrina se levantó de la mesa y se dirigió con toda la intención hasta uno de los ventanales, sintió cómo los ojos de aquella la iban siguiendo.

—¿Has lamentado alguna vez no haberte casado con lord Warburton? —le preguntó la señora Touchett.

Isabel negó con la cabeza lentamente, sin brusquedad.

—No, mi querida tía.

—Bien. Debo decirte que estoy dispuesta a creerme todo lo que me digas.

—El hecho de que vaya a creerme supone una gran tentación —afirmó Isabel, que seguía sonriendo.

—¿Una tentación para mentir? No te lo recomiendo, porque cuando estoy mal informada soy tan peligrosa como una rata envenenada. No temas, no te voy a echar nada en cara.

—Es mi marido el que no se lleva bien conmigo —dijo Isabel.

—Eso se lo podría haber dicho yo que pasaría. Con eso no te estoy echando en cara nada a ti —añadió la señora Touchett—. ¿Te sigue agradando Serena Merle? —continuó.

—No como antes. Pero ya da igual, porque se marcha a Estados Unidos.

—¿A Estados Unidos? Vaya, debe de haber hecho algo muy malo.

—Sí, muy malo.

—¿Puedo preguntar de qué se trata?

—Me utilizó.

—¡Y a mí también! —exclamó la señora Touchett—. Lo hace con todo el mundo.

—También utilizará a Estados Unidos —afirmó Isabel mientras volvía a sonreír y se alegraba de que hubiesen acabado las preguntas de su tía.

No pudo ver a Ralph hasta bien entrada la tarde. Había estado todo el día dormitando o, al menos, yacía inconsciente. El doctor había estado con él pero se marchó al rato… el mismo doctor local que había atendido a su padre y al que Ralph tanto apreciaba. Iba tres o cuatro veces al día, pues estaba muy interesado en el estado de su paciente. Antes lo atendía sir Matthew Hope, pero Ralph se había cansado de ese ilustre médico y había pedido a su madre que le enviase recado de que había muerto y, por lo tanto, ya no precisaba de sus servicios. La señora Touchett se había limitado a escribir a sir Matthew informándole de que no era del agrado de su hijo. Como digo, el día de la llegada de Isabel Ralph no dio señales de estar despierto durante muchas horas, pero al caer la noche abrió los ojos y dijo que sabía que ella se encontraba allí. No estaba claro cómo podía saberlo, ya que nadie se lo había dicho por miedo a que se alterase. Isabel entró y se sentó junto a su cama, en la penumbra creada por una vela cubierta que había encendida en un rincón de la habitación. Dijo a la enfermera que podía retirarse, ya que ella misma se quedaría con él el resto de la noche. Ralph había abierto los ojos y la había reconocido, y movió la mano, que yacía inerte junto a él, para que Isabel la cogiera; pero no podía hablar, así que volvió a cerrar los ojos y permaneció inmóvil

sosteniendo su mano. Isabel estuvo allí mucho tiempo… hasta que regresó la enfermera, pero en ese tiempo Ralph no volvió a dar ninguna señal de vida. Podría haber fallecido mientras ella lo contemplaba; de hecho, ya era la viva imagen de la muerte. Ya le había parecido que estaba muy mal en Roma, pero aquello era mucho peor, y solo cabía esperar un único cambio. Había un extraño aire de tranquilidad en su rostro, que estaba tan quieto como la tapa de una caja. Por lo demás, Ralph era un mero armazón de huesos, y cuando había abierto los ojos para saludarla fue como si Isabel contemplara un espacio inconmensurable. La enfermera no volvió hasta la medianoche, pero las horas no se le hicieron largas a Isabel, ya que a eso era a lo que había ido. Si había ido a esperar, tuvo abundantes ocasiones de hacerlo, pues Ralph yació durante tres días en una especie de agradecido silencio. Siempre la reconocía, y a veces parecía que quería hablarle, pero no le salía la voz. Entonces volvía a cerrar los ojos, como si él también estuviese esperando algo… algo que sin duda terminaría por llegar. Permanecía tan inmóvil que a veces Isabel creía que ya había llegado el momento, y aun así nunca dejó de pensar que seguían juntos. No obstante, no estaban siempre juntos; Isabel pasaba horas deambulando por la casa vacía, intentando escuchar una voz que no era la del pobre Ralph. Vivía con el miedo constante de que su marido pudiera escribirle. Sin embargo, este permaneció en silencio, y la única carta que recibió Isabel procedía de Florencia y era de la condesa Gemini. Finalmente, la noche del tercer día, Ralph habló.

—Me siento mejor esta noche —murmuró de pronto en la silenciosa penumbra de la vigilia de Isabel—, creo que puedo decir algo. —Ella se arrodilló junto a su almohada, le cogió la delgada mano y le rogó que no hiciese el esfuerzo, que no se fatigara. El rostro de Ralph permaneció por fuerza serio, incapaz de realizar el juego muscular necesario para sonreír, pero parecía que su dueño no había perdido la capacidad de percibir las incoherencias—: ¿Y qué más da que me fatigue si voy a tener toda la eternidad para descansar? No pasa nada porque haga un esfuerzo, ya que va a ser el último. ¿No dicen que la gente se siente siempre mejor justo antes del final? Lo he oído muchas veces, y eso es a lo que estaba esperando. Desde que viniste supe que este momento llegaría. Lo he intentado dos o tres veces, porque me daba miedo que te cansaras de estar ahí sentada. —Hablaba despacio, con dolorosas interrupciones y largas pausas, y su voz parecía proceder de muy lejos. Tras pronunciar estas palabras, permaneció con la cabeza girada hacia Isabel mientras la miraba con sus grandes ojos sin pestañear—. Me alegro mucho de que hayas venido —prosiguió—. Pensaba que lo harías, pero tampoco estaba seguro.

—Yo tampoco lo estaba hasta que vine —dijo Isabel.

—Has sido como un ángel junto a mi lecho. Ya sabes que dicen que hay un ángel de la muerte. Es el más hermoso de todos. Eso has sido tú, como si estuvieses esperándome.

—No estaba esperando que murieses, sino que esperaba… esto mismo. Esto no es la muerte, mi querido Ralph.

—No, no lo es… para ti. No hay nada que nos haga sentir tan vivos como ver a otros morir. Nos proporciona una sensación de vida… de que seguimos aquí. Incluso yo la he tenido. Pero ahora solo sirvo para que otros la puedan tener. Para mí ya ha terminado todo. —Y entonces se detuvo. Isabel inclinó la cabeza aún más, hasta apoyarla sobre las dos manos que tenía entrelazadas sobre la de Ralph. No podía verlo en esos momentos, pero sentía su lejana voz junto al oído—. Isabel —prosiguió de repente—, ojalá también hubiera terminado todo para ti. —Ella no dijo nada, y rompió a sollozar mientras permanecía con la cabeza hundida. Ralph continuó en silencio escuchando sus sollozos, hasta que dejó escapar un largo gemido—: ¡Ay, cuánto has hecho por mí!

—¿Y todo lo que has hecho tú por mí? —exclamó Isabel, que intentó aplacar con su actitud la extremada agitación que la embargaba. Había perdido toda vergüenza, todo deseo de ocultar nada. Ralph tenía que saberlo todo. Quería que lo supiera, pues de esa forma estarían inextricablemente unidos, y, además, él ya estaba más allá de todo dolor—. Hiciste en una ocasión algo muy importante por mí, y lo sabes. Lo has sido todo para mí, Ralph. ¿Que yo he hecho mucho por ti? Ojalá pudiera hacer algo hoy. Moriría si así pudieses tú vivir. Pero no deseo que vivas: moriría yo misma para no perderte.

Su voz estaba tan rota como la de él, anegada por las lágrimas y la angustia.

—No me perderás… me tendrás siempre. Llévame en tu corazón, y así estaré más cerca de ti de lo que haya estado jamás. Mi querida Isabel, la vida es mejor, porque en la vida hay amor. La muerte es buena… pero en ella no hay amor.

—Nunca te di las gracias… nunca te dije nada… ¡nunca fui lo que debería haber sido! —continuó Isabel, con la arrebatada necesidad de gritar y acusarse, de dejar que su pena la poseyera. En esos momentos todos sus problemas se convirtieron en uno solo y se fundieron con el dolor que sentía—. ¿Qué habrás pensado de mí? Pero ¿cómo podía yo saberlo? No lo sabía, y si ahora lo sé es porque hay personas menos estúpidas que yo.

—No te preocupes por los demás —dijo Ralph—. Creo que me alegro de tener que dejarlos.

Isabel levantó la cabeza y las manos unidas, y por un instante pareció estar rogándole.

—¿Es verdad… es verdad eso? —preguntó.

—¿Que has sido estúpida? No, no —dijo Ralph, con clara intención irónica.

—Que me hiciste rica… que todo lo que tengo es tuyo.

Él apartó la cabeza y estuvo un tiempo sin decir nada, hasta que al fin murmuró:

—No hables de eso… no fue una idea muy acertada. —Lentamente volvió a girar la cabeza hacia ella, y de nuevo se miraron a los ojos—. ¡Si no lo hubiera hecho… si no lo hubiera hecho…! —Hizo otra pausa—. Creo que te arruiné la vida —gimió.

Isabel era consciente de que Ralph estaba más allá de todo dolor, de que apenas parecía pertenecer ya a este mundo. Pero, aunque no hubiera sido así, ella habría hablado de todos modos, pues nada importaba en esos momentos salvo el conocimiento de lo único que no era pura angustia: saber que se estaban enfrentando juntos a la verdad.

—Se casó conmigo por mi dinero —dijo.

Quería decírselo todo, y temía que él muriese antes de que pudiera hacerlo. Ralph la contempló un momento y, por primera vez, bajó los párpados de sus inmóviles ojos. No obstante, los levantó enseguida y dijo:

—Él estaba muy enamorado de ti.

—Sí, estaba muy enamorado de mí, pero no se habría casado conmigo de haber sido yo pobre. No pretendo herirte diciéndote esto. ¿Cómo podría? Solo quiero que lo entiendas. Siempre he hecho todo lo posible para evitarlo, pero eso ya ha terminado.

—Siempre lo he entendido todo —dijo Ralph.

—Eso me figuraba, y no me gustaba que así fuera. Pero ahora me alegro.

—No me estás hiriendo… me estás haciendo muy feliz —afirmó él con voz de gran satisfacción. Isabel volvió a agachar la cabeza y apretó los labios contra la mano de Ralph—. Siempre lo he entendido todo —repitió—, aunque resultara tan extraño, tan triste. Querías ver la vida por ti misma, pero no te lo permitieron… y te castigaron por tener ese deseo. Te han obligado a llevar una existencia convencional.

—Sí, me han castigado —sollozó Isabel.

Ralph la escuchó un momento y continuó:

—¿Se enfadó mucho porque vinieras?

—Me lo puso muy difícil, pero me da igual.

—Entonces, ¿ha terminado todo entre vosotros?

—No, no, no creo que haya terminado nada.

—¿Vas a volver con él? —preguntó Ralph jadeante.

—No lo sé… no sabría decirte Me quedaré aquí todo el tiempo que pueda. No quiero pensar… ni tampoco hace falta que piense. Lo único que me importa eres tú, y con eso ya tengo bastante de momento. Esto va a durar todavía un poco más. Aquí, de rodillas, contigo muriendo en mis brazos, soy más feliz de lo que lo he sido en mucho tiempo. Y quiero que seas feliz, que no pienses en nada triste, solo que sientas que estoy junto a ti y que te quiero. ¿Por qué tendría que haber dolor en ello? En momentos como este, eso es lo de menos. El dolor no es lo más profundo; hay algo que lo es aún más.

Estaba claro que Ralph tenía cada vez mayores dificultades para hablar, y tardaba más en recobrar fuerzas. Al principio pareció que no iba a contestar nada a esas últimas palabras, y dejó pasar mucho tiempo. Luego simplemente murmuró:

—Tienes que quedarte aquí.

—Me gustaría quedarme… el tiempo que sea correcto.

—¿Que sea correcto? ¿Que sea correcto? —repitió Ralph—. Siempre estás pensando en lo mismo.

—No hay más remedio. Estás muy cansado —le dijo Isabel.

—Sí, estoy muy cansado. Acabas de decir que el dolor no es lo más profundo. No, no lo es, pero de todas formas es muy profundo. Si pudiera quedarme…

—Para mí siempre seguirás aquí —lo interrumpió suavemente Isabel.

Era muy fácil interrumpirlo en esas circunstancias. Aun así, Ralph continuó al cabo de un momento:

—Al fin y al cabo, todo pasa. Ahora mismo está pasando. Pero el amor permanece. No entiendo por qué tenemos

que sufrir tanto. Quizá lo averigüe ahora. La vida tiene tanto que ofrecer, y tú eres tan joven…

—Me siento muy mayor —dijo Isabel.

—Volverás a rejuvenecer. Así es como te veo. No creo… no creo…

Le fallaron las fuerzas y tuvo que detenerse. Isabel le rogó que no intentase hablar.

—No necesitamos decir nada para entendernos.

—No creo que un error tan generoso como el que cometiste pueda perjudicarte ya mucho más.

—Ralph, en estos momentos soy muy feliz —consiguió decir Isabel entre lágrimas.

—Y recuerda esto —continuó él—: puede que te hayan odiado, pero también has sido muy amada. Más que amada, Isabel… ¡adorada! —dijo Ralph con un suspiro casi imperceptible y prolongado.

—¡Oh, hermano mío! —lloró Isabel, postrándose aún más ante él.

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La primera noche que Isabel había pasado en Gardencourt años atrás, Ralph le había dicho que, si llegaba a sufrir lo suficiente, tal vez algún día vería al fantasma del que aquella vieja casa estaba debidamente provista. Al parecer ya había cumplido ese requisito, pues a la mañana siguiente, a la fría y tenue luz del amanecer, Isabel supo que había un espíritu junto a su cama. Se había acostado sin desvestirse, convencida de que Ralph no sobreviviría a aquella noche. No era que tuviese ganas de dormir; quería permanecer en vela mientras esperaba, pero aun así cerró los ojos, convencida de que en el transcurso de la noche llamarían a su puerta. Nadie llamó, pero, cuando la oscuridad comenzaba a volverse vagamente gris, se incorporó en la cama de forma tan súbita como si hubiese oído el golpe en la puerta. Por un instante le pareció que él estaba allí, como una figura imprecisa flotando en la imprecisión de la estancia. Isabel lo miró fijamente un momento y vio su pálido rostro, sus amables ojos; luego comprobó que no había nada. No sintió miedo, solo una profunda certeza. Salió de la habitación y, poseída por esa certidumbre, atravesó oscuros pasillos y bajó un tramo de escalones de roble que brillaban a la tenue luz de una ventana del vestíbulo. Se detuvo un momento ante la puerta de Ralph y escuchó, pero solo le pareció oír el silencio que la dominaba. Abrió la puerta con tanta suavidad como si estuviera levantando el velo del rostro de un muerto, y vio a la señora Touchett sentada inmóvil y muy erguida junto a la cama de su hijo, con una de sus manos en la suya. El médico estaba al otro lado, sosteniendo la otra muñeca del pobre Ralph entre sus profesionales dedos. La enfermera y el sirviente estaban entre ambos a los pies de la cama. La señora Touchett no se percató de la presencia de Isabel, pero el médico la miró fijamente, y luego dejó con mucho cuidado la mano de Ralph junto al cuerpo en la posición adecuada. La enfermera también la miró con intensidad, pero nadie dijo nada; aún así, Isabel comprobó lo que había ido a ver. El rostro de Ralph estaba más hermoso de lo que lo había sido en vida, y guardaba un extraño parecido con el de su padre, que Isabel había visto yaciendo sobre la misma almohada seis años atrás. Se acercó a su tía y la rodeó con un brazo; la señora Touchett, que por lo general ni se prestaba a las caricias ni las recibía con agrado, aceptó aquella durante unos instantes, e incluso se incorporó un poco más para recibirla. Aun así, permaneció rígida y con los ojos secos, y mantuvo en su agudo y pálido rostro una expresión que resultaba terrible.

—Mi querida tía Lydia —murmuró Isabel.

—Da gracias a Dios por no tener hijos —dijo la señora Touchett, apartándose suavemente de su abrazo.

Tres días después, un considerable número de personas encontró tiempo, en el momento más álgido de la «temporada» londinense, para coger un tren matutino hasta una tranquila estación de Berkshire y pasar media hora en una pequeña iglesia gris que estaba a escasa distancia. Fue en el verde cementerio de ese edificio en el que la señora Touchett entregó a su hijo a la tierra. Ella estaba al borde de la tumba con Isabel a su lado, y ni siquiera el propio sacristán parecía tener un interés más práctico en la escena que la señora Touchett. Era una ocasión solemne, pero tampoco especialmente dura o penosa, y hasta todo presentaba cierto aspecto jovial. Hacía buen tiempo; el día, uno de los últimos del traicionero mayo, era cálido y sin viento, y la atmósfera tenía el brillo del espino y del mirlo. Era triste pensar en el pobre Touchett, pero tampoco en exceso, ya que en su muerte no había habido violencia. Llevaba tanto tiempo muriéndose que estaba totalmente preparado para ello, y del mismo modo todo había estado listo para cuando ocurriese lo que se sabía inevitable. Isabel tenía lágrimas en los ojos, pero no llegaban a cegarla. A través de ellas podía contemplar la belleza del día, el esplendor de la naturaleza, el encanto de aquel viejo cementerio inglés, las cabezas inclinadas de unos buenos amigos. Lord Warburton estaba allí, así como un grupo de caballeros a los que no conocía, varios de los cuales, como supo después, estaban relacionados con el banco. Había otros asistentes a los que sí conocía. La señorita Stackpole estaba en primera fila con el bueno del señor Bantling a su lado, y también Caspar Goodwood, con la cabeza más erguida que el resto… o inclinándose menos que las demás. Durante buena parte del tiempo Isabel fue consciente de la mirada del señor Goodwood, que la estaba contemplando de una forma algo más intensa de lo que solía mirar en público, mientras que los otros tenían la vista fija en la hierba del cementerio. Pero Isabel no le dejó ver en ningún momento que sabía que la estaba mirando, y solo pensó en él para extrañarse de que todavía siguiera en Inglaterra. Se dio cuenta de que había dado por sentado que, una vez que acompañase a Ralph a Gardencourt, se marcharía, ya que recordaba lo poco que le gustaba el país. Sin embargo, allí

estaba, de forma muy notoria, y había algo en su actitud que parecía indicar que se hallaba en aquel lugar con alguna intrincada intención. Isabel no quiso mirarlo a los ojos, aunque sin duda habría hallado compasión en ellos; pero su presencia hacía que se sintiera bastante incómoda. Al dispersarse el pequeño grupo, el señor Goodwood desapareció, y la única persona que se acercó a hablar con Isabel, mientras otras lo hacían con la señora Touchett, fue Henrietta Stackpole. Henrietta había estado llorando.

Ralph le había dicho a Isabel que esperaba que se quedase en Gardencourt, y ella no mostró disposición alguna de marcharse pronto del lugar. Se dijo que lo menos que podía hacer era la buena acción de pasar algún tiempo con su tía. Tuvo suerte de contar con un motivo tan bueno; de lo contrario, tendría que haberse molestado en encontrar alguno. Su misión ya había concluido; ya había hecho aquello por lo que había dejado a su marido. Tenía un marido en una ciudad del extranjero que contaba las horas que llevaba ausente, y en una situación así era necesario disponer de un excelente motivo. No es que él fuera el mejor de los maridos, pero eso tampoco venía al caso. El hecho de estar casado implicaba ciertas obligaciones que eran totalmente independientes de la cantidad de felicidad que pudiese proporcionar. Isabel pensaba en su marido lo menos posible, pero ahora que estaba lejos, fuera de su hechizo, pensaba en Roma con una especie de estremecimiento espiritual. La imagen le producía un escalofrío muy intenso que hacía que buscase refugio en las sombras más profundas de Gardencourt. Vivía el día presente, posponiéndolo todo, cerrando los ojos, intentando no pensar. Sabía que tenía que tomar una decisión, pero ella no decidía nada. El haber ido allí no había sido fruto de una decisión. Esa ocasión solo había supuesto un punto de partida. Osmond no daba señales de vida, y estaba claro que iba a seguir sin darlas, dejándolo todo en manos de ella. De Pansy tampoco sabía nada, pero eso era muy fácil de explicar: su padre le había dicho que no le escribiera.

La señora Touchett aceptó la compañía de Isabel, aunque no requería de su ayuda. Parecía estar absorta en considerar, sin entusiasmo pero con perfecta lucidez, las ventajas de su nueva situación. La señora Touchett no era una persona optimista, pero conseguía sacar cierto provecho hasta de las circunstancias más dolorosas, el cual consistía en llegar a la conclusión de que, al fin y al cabo, le había pasado a otra gente y no a ella. La muerte era algo desagradable, pero en ese caso se trataba de la de su hijo, no de la suya, y se vanagloriaba de que su propia muerte no resultaría desagradable para nadie, salvo para ella misma. La señora Touchett se hallaba en una posición mucho más acomodada que la del pobre Ralph, quien había dejado tras de sí todas las comodidades de la vida y, de hecho, dispuestas con total seguridad; para su madre, lo peor de morirse era quedar expuesto a que se aprovecharan de uno. Pero ella seguía allí, y no podía haber nada mejor. Comunicó a Isabel con mucha puntualidad, ya que fue la misma noche del entierro de su hijo, varias de las disposiciones testamentarias de Ralph. Este lo había hablado y consultado todo con ella. No había dejado dinero a su madre, a la que por supuesto no le hacía ninguna falta; solo el mobiliario de Gardencourt, a excepción de los cuadros y los libros, así como el uso de la casa durante un año, al cabo del cual habría de venderse. El dinero que se obtuviera de la venta se donaría a un hospital para pobres que padecían la misma enfermedad de la que Ralph había muerto, quedando lord Warburton nombrado albacea de esa parte del testamento. Había dispuesto el resto de sus bienes, que habría que retirar del banco, en varios legados, a varios de aquellos primos de Vermont con los que su padre ya había sido tan munificiente. Después había otros cuantos legados menores.

—Algunos son realmente curiosos —dijo la señora Touchett—, ya que ha dejado considerables sumas de dinero a personas de las que nunca he oído hablar. Me dio una lista de las mismas y le pregunté quiénes eran algunas de ellas, y me dijo que eran personas que en diferentes momentos de su vida le había dado la impresión de que lo apreciaban. Parece que pensaba que tú no lo apreciabas, porque no te ha dejado ni un penique. Era de la opinión de que su padre ya te había tratado con mucha generosidad, y debo decir que creo que en efecto así fue… aunque nunca oí a Ralph quejarse de ello. Los cuadros se van a dispersar; los ha dejado repartidos, uno por uno, a modo de pequeños recuerdos. El más valioso de la colección es para lord Warburton. Y no puedes ni imaginarte lo que ha hecho con su biblioteca. Parece una broma pesada. Se la ha dejado a tu amiga la señorita Stackpole, «en reconocimiento a sus servicios a la literatura». ¿Se refiere a que lo acompañó desde Roma? ¿Es eso un servicio a la literatura? Contiene ejemplares muy raros y valiosos, y si no puede llevarla consigo por el mundo en su baúl, le recomienda que la venda en subasta. Está claro que la venderá en Christie’s, y con lo que obtenga fundará un periódico. ¿Será eso un servicio a la literatura?

Isabel se abstuvo de contestar a esa pregunta, ya que superaba el cupo del pequeño interrogatorio al que había considerado necesario someterse a su llegada. Además, nunca le había interesado tan poco la literatura como en esos días, como comprobaba cada vez que cogía de un estante alguno de esos volúmenes raros y valiosos de los que había

hablado la señora Touchett. No podía leer, ya que nunca se había sentido tan incapaz de centrar su atención. Una tarde en la biblioteca, alrededor de una semana después de la ceremonia en el cementerio, llevaba una hora intentando concentrarse, pero no dejaba de apartar los ojos del libro que tenía en las manos para mirar por la ventana abierta, que daba a la larga avenida. Fue así como vio un vehículo bastante modesto aproximarse a la entrada, y a lord Warburton sentado en una incómoda postura en un rincón del mismo. Él siempre había tenido un concepto muy elevado de la cortesía, así que no tenía nada de especial que, dadas las circunstancias, se hubiera molestado en ir desde Londres a visitar a la señora Touchett; porque estaba claro que era a la señora Touchett a quien había ido a visitar y no a la señora Osmond y, para demostrarse la validez de su tesis, Isabel salió poco después de la casa para dar un paseo por el parque. Desde que había llegado a Gardencourt había pasado poco tiempo fuera, ya que el tiempo no había acompañado para recorrer la finca. Sin embargo, hacía una tarde agradable, y al principio le pareció que había sido una buena idea salir. La teoría que acabo de mencionar era bastante plausible, pero no le proporcionó demasiado alivio, y quien la hubiera visto vagando de un lado a otro habría pensado que no tenía la conciencia tranquila. Seguía sin calmarse cuando, al cabo de un cuarto de hora, se encontró a la vista de la casa, de cuyo pórtico emergió la señora Touchett acompañada por su visitante. Estaba claro que su tía había propuesto a lord Warburton que fuesen a buscarla. Isabel no estaba de humor para visitas y, de haber tenido la oportunidad, se habría escondido detrás de alguno de aquellos grandes árboles, pero sabía que la habían visto y que no le quedaba más remedio que seguir avanzando a su encuentro. Como el jardín de Gardencourt ocupaba una vasta extensión de terreno, le llevó algún tiempo llegar hasta ellos, durante el cual observó que lord Warburton iba caminando junto a su tía con las manos a la espalda de forma bastante rígida y la vista fija en el suelo. Ambos parecían estar en silencio, pero la aguda mirada que la señora Touchett dirigió a Isabel resultaba expresiva incluso en la distancia. Parecía estar diciéndole con afilada mordacidad: «Aquí está el extremadamente complaciente noble con el que te podrías haber casado». No obstante, cuando lord Warburton levantó su mirada, sus ojos no dijeron eso, sino: «Es una situación bastante incómoda, así que espero que me ayude». Estaba muy serio, muy digno, y, por primera vez desde que Isabel lo conocía, no la saludó con una sonrisa. Incluso en los días de su aflicción siempre se había presentado ante ella con una sonrisa. En cambio, esa tarde parecía muy cohibido.

—Lord Warburton ha tenido la amabilidad de venir a verme —dijo la señora Touchett—. Dice que no sabía que seguías aquí. Sé que es un viejo amigo tuyo y, como me han dicho que no estabas en la casa, hemos salido a buscarte.

—Oh, he visto que hay un tren a las seis cuarenta y que me permitirá estar de vuelta para la hora de la cena —explicó el acompañante de la señora Touchett de forma bastante irrelevante—. Me alegro mucho de que aún siga aquí.

—No me voy a quedar mucho tiempo —dijo Isabel con cierta ansiedad.

—Ya me lo imagino, pero espero que sean algunas semanas. Vino a Inglaterra más pronto de lo que… de lo que esperaba, ¿no?

—Sí, vine de forma muy precipitada.

La señora Touchett se apartó como si estuviese inspeccionando el estado del terreno, que de hecho no estaba como debería, al tiempo que lord Warburton vacilaba unos instantes. Isabel supuso que había estado a punto de preguntarle por su marido, a juzgar por su turbación, pero había terminado por contenerse. Continuaba con el mismo aspecto serio, ya fuera porque consideraba que era el más apropiado en un lugar en el que acababa de acaecer una muerte, o por razones más personales. Si se trataba de esto último, era afortunado de poder encubrirlo bajo el primer motivo, que podía aprovechar al máximo. Todo eso es lo que pensó Isabel. No se trataba de que la expresión de su rostro fuera de tristeza, pues esa era otra cuestión, sino de que resultaba extrañamente inexpresiva.

—Mis hermanas habrían estado encantadas de venir si hubieran sabido que estaba usted aún aquí… si hubiesen pensado que las recibiría —continuó lord Warburton—. Tenga la bondad de dejar que la vean antes de marcharse de Inglaterra.

—Será un gran placer. Las recuerdo con mucho agrado.

—Tal vez le gustaría pasar un día o dos en Lockleigh. Ya sabe que tenemos esa vieja promesa pendiente. —Y su señoría se sonrojó un poco al hacer esa sugerencia, lo cual dio a su rostro un aire más familiar—. Puede que no sea muy correcto que se lo proponga justo ahora, cuando debe de tener usted pocas ganas de visitas, pero apenas tendría carácter de tal. Mis hermanas pasarán cinco días en Lockleigh por Pentecostés, y si va a verlas, ya que dice que no piensa permanecer mucho tiempo en Inglaterra, me encargaré de que no haya nadie más.

Isabel se preguntó si ni siquiera estaría allí la joven dama con la que iba a casarse, acompañada de su madre, pero

no llegó a decírselo.

—Se lo agradezco muchísimo —se limitó a contestar—, pero no creo que siga aquí por Pentecostés.

—Pero cuento con su promesa… ¿no?, para alguna otra ocasión.

Isabel hizo caso omiso de la pregunta. Contempló a su interlocutor un momento y el resultado fue, como en otras ocasiones, que sintió pena por él.

—Procure no perder su tren —dijo. Y luego añadió—: Le deseo toda la felicidad del mundo.

Él volvió a sonrojarse, con mayor intensidad que antes, y miró el reloj.

—Ah, sí; el de las seis cuarenta. No me queda mucho tiempo, pero tengo una calesa esperando en la puerta. Muchas gracias. —No quedó claro si el agradecimiento se refería al recordatorio del tren o al comentario de índole más sentimental—. Adiós, señora Osmond, adiós.

Le tendió la mano sin mirarla a los ojos, y después se giró hacia la señora Touchett, que había vuelto a donde estaban. Su despedida de ella también fue muy breve, y al poco ambas damas lo vieron alejarse a grandes zancadas por el jardín.

—¿Está segura de que va a casarse? —preguntó Isabel a su tía.

—No lo puedo estar más que él, pero parece que es seguro. Le he dado mis felicitaciones por la boda y las ha aceptado.

—En fin, dejémoslo estar —dijo Isabel, tras lo cual su tía volvió a la casa y a las distracciones de las que la había interrumpido el visitante.

Isabel lo dejó estar, pero siguió pensando en ello mientras paseaba de nuevo bajo los grandes robles, cuyas sombras se extendían alargadas sobre la hierba. Al cabo de unos pocos minutos se encontró cerca de un rústico banco que reconoció al momento. No se trataba simplemente de que lo hubiera visto antes, o ni siquiera de que se hubiera sentado en él: lo reconoció porque en ese lugar le había ocurrido algo importante, y de ahí que enseguida lo asociara con algo. Entonces recordó que seis años antes estaba ahí sentada cuando un sirviente le trajo desde la casa la carta en la que Caspar Goodwood la informaba de que había ido a Europa a buscarla, y que, al terminar de leerla, levantó la cabeza y oyó cómo lord Warburton le anunciaba su intención de casarse con ella. Sin duda era un banco lleno de interés, histórico, que contempló como si tuviera algo que decirle. No quiso sentarse en él en esa ocasión, ya que le daba bastante miedo. Se limitó a quedarse plantada ante él, y mientras estaba allí, el pasado volvió a ella en una de esas oleadas de emoción que sobrevienen a las personas sensibles en los momentos más extraños. El resultado de esa conmoción fue que de pronto sintió un gran cansancio, bajo cuya influencia venció sus reticencias y se dejó caer en el rústico asiento. Ya he dicho antes que estaba inquieta e incapaz de concentrarse en nada; y, de haberla visto ahí sentada, no sé si habrían admirado la propiedad del primer epíteto, pero al menos habrían concedido que en esos momentos era la viva imagen de una víctima de la indolencia. Su actitud tenía una peculiar falta de motivación; las manos le colgaban a los lados y se perdían entre los pliegues de su vestido negro, mientras que sus ojos miraban perdidos al frente. No había nada por lo que tuviese que volver a la casa, ya que durante su reclusión ambas damas solían cenar temprano y no tomaban el té a una hora fija. Isabel no sabía cuánto tiempo llevaba allí sentada, pero el crepúsculo ya estaba muy avanzado cuando se dio cuenta de que no estaba sola. Rápidamente se enderezó, miró a su alrededor y comprobó qué había sido de su soledad. La estaba compartiendo con Caspar Goodwood, que la miraba de pie a unos pocos metros, y cuyas pisadas sobre la silenciosa hierba al aproximarse no había oído Isabel. De pronto recordó que había sido justo así como lord Warburton la había sorprendido en aquella otra ocasión.

Se levantó al instante y, en cuanto Goodwood se percató de que lo había visto, se acercó a ella. Apenas había tenido tiempo Isabel de ponerse en pie cuando, con un movimiento que parecía violento pero que ella sintió como… no sabía bien qué, él la cogió de la muñeca e hizo que volviera a sentarse. Isabel cerró los ojos; no porque le hubiera hecho daño, ya que solo había sido un ligero toque, que ella había obedecido. Pero había algo en el rostro de Caspar Goodwood que no quería ver. La estaba mirando de la misma forma en que lo había hecho unos días antes en el cementerio, solo que en esos momentos era aún peor. Él no dijo nada al principio; Isabel tan solo lo sintió cerca de ella, sentado a su lado en el banco y girado en su dirección de forma apremiante. Tuvo casi la sensación de que nunca nadie había estado tan cerca de ella. No obstante, todo eso solo duró un momento, al término del cual liberó su muñeca de la mano de él y lo miró de frente.

—Me ha asustado —dijo.

—No era mi intención —contestó él—, pero si solo la he asustado un poco, no tiene importancia. He llegado en tren desde Londres hace un rato, pero no he podido venir aquí directamente. Había un hombre en la estación que se

me ha adelantado. Ha tomado la única calesa que había y le he oído dar esta dirección. No sé quién era, pero he preferido no venir con él, ya que quería verla a usted a solas. Así que me he puesto a caminar haciendo tiempo, y cuando ya estaba casi llegando a la casa la he visto aquí sentada. Me he encontrado con un guarda o algo así, pero como me conocía de cuando vine acompañando a su primo, no me ha puesto ningún problema. ¿Se ha ido ya ese caballero? ¿Está sola de verdad? Quiero hablar con usted.

Hablaba muy deprisa, con la misma ansiedad de aquella velada en Roma en que se habían despedido. Isabel había esperado que ese estado de Goodwood remitiera, pero se amilanó aún más cuando comprobó que, por el contrario, era más fuerte que nunca. Tenía una sensación que él no le había producido nunca: una sensación de peligro. Sin duda había algo verdaderamente formidable en su actitud decidida. Isabel se quedó mirando al frente mientras él, con una mano sobre cada rodilla, se inclinaba hacia delante y la observaba fijamente. El crepúsculo pareció hacerse más oscuro en torno a ambos.

—Quiero hablar con usted —repitió Goodwood—, porque tengo algo importante que decirle. No quiero molestarla… como hice el otro día en Roma. Aquello solo sirvió para afligirla, pero no lo pude evitar aunque sabía que estaba obrando mal. Pero ahora no estoy obrando mal. Por favor, no piense eso —prosiguió mientras su fría y profunda voz adquiría por un instante un tono de súplica—. Hoy es diferente, porque he venido por un motivo concreto. No sirvió de nada que le hablara en aquella ocasión, pero ahora puedo ayudarla.

Isabel no podría haber dicho si era porque se sentía asustada, o porque oír esa voz en la oscuridad le resultaba de verdad una gran ayuda, pero lo cierto es que le escuchó como nunca antes lo había hecho, y las palabras de él calaron muy hondo en lo más profundo de su alma. Produjeron una especie de quietud en todo su ser, tanto que tuvo que hacer un esfuerzo para poder contestarle.

—¿Cómo me puede ayudar? —le preguntó en voz baja, como si se hubiera tomado lo que le había dicho tan en serio que necesitara hacerlo en tono confidencial.

—Convenciéndola para que confíe en mí. Ahora ya lo sé… lo sé todo. ¿Recuerda lo que le pregunté en Roma? Entonces estaba casi a oscuras, pero ahora lo sé todo de muy buena tinta, y lo veo todo con mucha claridad. Fue una gran idea que me hiciera venir a Inglaterra con su primo. Era un buen hombre, de los mejores, y me contó cuál era la situación. Adivinó mis sentimientos y me lo explicó todo. Como miembro de su familia que era, la dejó a usted, mientras estuviera aquí en Inglaterra, a mi cuidado —dijo Goodwood como si estuviera incidiendo en un punto crucial—. ¿Sabe lo que me dijo la última vez que lo vi, mientras yacía en su lecho de muerte? Me dijo: «Haga todo lo que pueda por ella; haga todo lo que le permita hacer por ella».

Isabel se levantó de repente.

—¡No tenían ningún derecho a hablar de mí!

—¿Y por qué no… por qué no, si estábamos hablando en estos términos? —le preguntó él, levantándose también rápidamente—. Y, además, él se estaba muriendo, y cuando alguien se está muriendo todo es diferente. —Isabel reprimió el ademán que había hecho de marcharse, porque lo estaba escuchando con más intensidad que nunca. Era cierto que él no era el mismo que el de la última vez. Aquello solo había sido un inútil arrebato de pasión sin sentido, mientras que ahora sí que tenía una idea fija, que Isabel podía sentir en todo su ser—. ¡Pero da igual! —exclamó Goodwood acosándola aún con mayor insistencia, aunque esa vez sin tocarle ni un hilo de la ropa—. Aunque Touchett no hubiese abierto la boca, yo lo habría sabido de todos modos. Bastaba con mirarla durante el funeral de su primo para darse cuenta de lo que le pasa. Ya no me puede engañar más, así que le ruego por Dios que sea sincera con un hombre que lo es tanto con usted. Es usted la más desdichada de las mujeres, y su marido el peor de los demonios.

Isabel se giró hacia él como si la hubiera golpeado.

—¿Es que se ha vuelto loco? —exclamó.

—Nunca he estado tan cuerdo, ahora lo veo todo con claridad. No se sienta en la obligación de defenderlo. No voy a decir nada más en su contra; solo voy a hablar de usted —añadió Goodwood rápidamente—. ¿Cómo puede fingir que no está desconsolada? No sabe qué hacer, ni adónde acudir. Ya es tarde para interpretar ningún papel; ¿acaso no dejó todo eso atrás en Roma? Touchett sabía, y yo también lo sé, lo que le supondría venir aquí. ¿Acaso no le costará la propia vida? Dígame que es así —dijo casi estallando de ira—, ¡diga por una vez la verdad! Sabiendo yo semejante horror, ¿cómo no voy a querer salvarla? ¿Qué pensaría usted de mí si me quedara sin hacer nada y dejase que volviera a Roma para recibir su merecido? «¡El precio que tendrá que pagar será terrible!» Eso es lo que me dijo Touchett. No le importa que se lo diga, ¿no? A fin de cuentas, ¡era un pariente muy cercano! —dijo, volviendo a

insistir en ese punto extraño y macabro—. Antes dejaría que me mataran a consentir que otro hombre me dijera tales cosas, pero él era diferente, y se notaba que tenía razón. Fue una vez que ya estuvo aquí en casa y se dio cuenta de que se estaba muriendo, algo que yo también podía ver. Ahora lo entiendo todo, y sé que a usted le da miedo volver. Está completamente sola y no sabe adónde acudir. No puede ir a ningún sitio, y lo sabe muy bien. Por lo tanto, le ruego que me tenga en cuenta a mí.

—¿Que le tenga en cuenta a usted? —dijo Isabel, de pie ante él en la penumbra.

La idea que le había parecido vislumbrar unos momentos antes se alzaba imponente sobre ella. Echó un poco la cabeza hacia atrás y la contempló como si fuera un cometa que surcase el cielo.

—No sabe adónde acudir, así que acuda directamente a mí. Quiero convencerla de que confíe en mí —repitió Goodwood. Entonces se detuvo y la miró con ojos brillantes—. ¿Por qué debería volver? ¿Por qué querría pasar por esa situación espantosa?

—¡Para huir de usted! —contestó Isabel.

Pero eso solo expresaba parte de lo que sentía. El resto era que nunca antes la habían amado de veras. Ella creía que sí, pero aquello era diferente: aquello era como el ardiente viento del desierto, cuya llegada aniquila a los demás como si fueran leves brisas de jardín. La envolvió por completo y la elevó por el aire, al tiempo que su sabor, como algo fuerte, acre y extraño, la obligaba a entreabrir sus apretados dientes.

Al principio Isabel pensó que, en respuesta a sus palabras, él estallaría con una violencia mayor. Sin embargo, al cabo de un instante Goodwood se mostró totalmente tranquilo. Quería demostrarle que estaba muy cuerdo, y que lo tenía todo razonado.

—Eso es lo que quiero evitar, y creo que puedo hacerlo si me escucha de una vez por todas. Es inconcebible que piense usted en volver a hundirse en esa miseria, en volver a respirar ese aire envenenado. Es usted la que no está en su sano juicio. Confíe en mí como si estuviera a mi cargo. ¿Por qué no habríamos de ser felices… cuando tenemos toda una vida por delante, cuando sería todo tan fácil? Soy suyo para siempre… por siempre jamás. Aquí estoy, firme como una roca. No tiene nada de lo que preocuparse. No tiene hijos, que podrían haber sido un obstáculo. Tal y como están las cosas, no tiene nada que considerar. Debe salvar lo que pueda de su vida, en vez de perderla toda tan solo porque haya perdido una parte. Sería un insulto para usted suponer que le preocupan las apariencias, lo que dirá la gente, la idiotez sin fin del mundo. No tenemos nada que ver con todo eso; estamos al margen y vemos las cosas tal y como son. Usted dio el gran paso al venir aquí, y el siguiente ya no es nada, es el paso más natural. Juro, como que estoy ahora aquí, que una mujer a la que se ha hecho sufrir tanto y tan deliberadamente tiene derecho a hacer lo que quiera con su vida… ¡incluso a lanzarse a vagar por las calles si eso le sirve de ayuda! Sé lo mucho que sufre, y por eso estoy aquí. Podemos hacer todo lo que queramos, porque no le debemos nada a nadie. ¿Qué hay que nos retenga, qué hay que tenga el menor derecho a interferir en un asunto como este? Es algo entre nosotros, y basta con que lo digamos para que así sea. ¿Acaso nacimos para pudrirnos en la miseria… para tener siempre miedo? ¡Nunca la he visto tener miedo! Si confía en mí, le aseguro que no la decepcionaré. Tenemos todo el mundo para nosotros… y el mundo es muy grande. Yo lo sé muy bien.

Isabel emitió un largo murmullo, como el de una criatura dolorida, como si él la estuviera hostigando con algo que le hiciese daño.

—El mundo es muy pequeño —dijo al azar, con el inmenso deseo de parecer que oponía resistencia.

Lo hizo para oírse decir algo, pero en realidad no era lo que pretendía. El mundo nunca le había parecido tan grande como en esos momentos. Parecía abrirse y envolverla, hasta adoptar la forma de un poderoso mar, en cuyas aguas insondables parecía flotar a la deriva. Quería ayuda y ahí la tenía, llegando como un impetuoso torrente. Ignoro si llegó a creer todo lo que él le dijo, pero justo en esos momentos Isabel pensaba que, después de la muerte, dejar que él la cogiera firmemente entre sus brazos sería lo mejor que podría pasarle. Durante unos instantes dicha creencia le produjo una especie de rapto en el que sintió que se hundía cada vez más, y hasta le pareció agitar los pies para intentar sostenerse, para encontrar algo sobre lo que apoyarse.

—¡Sea mía como suyo soy yo! —oyó decir a su acompañante, quien de pronto prescindía de toda argumentación, y cuya voz parecía llegar, dura y terrible, a través de una confusión de sonidos más imprecisos.

Sin embargo, eso no dejaba de ser un hecho subjetivo, como diría un metafísico. La confusión, el ruido del agua y todo lo demás solo estaban en su cabeza flotando a la deriva. Isabel se percató al momento de ello.

—Le ruego que me haga el mayor de los favores —dijo con voz jadeante—. ¡Le suplico que se marche!

—¡No me diga eso! ¡No me mate! —exclamó Goodwood.

Isabel juntó las manos mientras las lágrimas brotaban de sus ojos.

—Si me ama, si me compadece, ¡déjeme en paz!

Él la miró durante un momento a través de la penumbra, y al siguiente Isabel sintió sus brazos alrededor de ella y sus labios contra los suyos. El beso fue como un relámpago cegador, un destello que se expandió más y más para después permanecer; y lo más extraordinario fue que, mientras lo recibía, sintió que todos aquellos aspectos de la fuerte hombría de Caspar Goodwood que menos le gustaban, cada rasgo agresivo de su rostro, de su figura, de su presencia, quedaban justificados por su profunda e intensa identidad y se fundían con aquel acto de posesión. Era lo que había oído decir que les pasaba a los que naufragaban y se hundían bajo el agua: que veían desfilar toda una serie de imágenes antes de ahogarse. Pero, cuando volvió la oscuridad, Isabel se sintió libre. No miró en ningún momento atrás, y salió huyendo de aquel lugar. Había luz en las ventanas de la casa, que alumbraba a lo lejos el jardín. En un tiempo extraordinariamente breve, dada la considerable distancia, Isabel avanzó a través de la oscuridad (ya que no veía nada) y llegó a la puerta. Solo entonces se detuvo. Miró a su alrededor, intentó escuchar algo, y puso la mano en el pasador. Antes no sabía adónde acudir, pero ahora ya lo sabía. Había una senda muy recta ante ella.

Dos días después Caspar Goodwood llamó a la puerta de la casa de Wimpole Street en la que Henrietta Stackpole ocupaba un piso amueblado. Apenas había retirado la mano de la aldaba cuando la puerta se abrió y apareció la señorita Stackpole en persona. Llevaba puestos el sombrero y la chaqueta, ya que estaba a punto de salir.

—Oh, buenos días —dijo él—. Tenía la esperanza de encontrar aquí a la señora Osmond.

Henrietta lo hizo esperar un momento antes de contestar, pero la señorita Stackpole siempre resultaba muy expresiva incluso cuando estaba callada.

—¿Y qué le ha hecho pensar que podría estar aquí?

—He ido a Gardencourt esta mañana y el sirviente me ha dicho que estaba en Londres, y que creía que había venido a verla.

De nuevo la señorita Stackpole lo mantuvo en vilo, aunque con toda la buena intención.

—Vino ayer y pasó la noche aquí. Pero esta mañana ha partido hacia Roma.

Caspar Goodwood no la miraba. Tenía la vista fija en el escalón de la puerta.

—¿Que se ha marchado…? —consiguió balbucear.

Y sin terminar la frase ni levantar la mirada, se apartó rígidamente de la puerta, apenas capaz de moverse. Henrietta salió, cerró la puerta tras ella y se cogió de su brazo.

—Mire, señor Goodwood —dijo—, ¡solo tiene que esperar!

Al oír esto, levantó la cabeza y la miró… pero solo para descubrir en el rostro de ella, con gran disgusto, que lo único que había querido decirle era que todavía era joven. Ella sonreía radiante al ofrecer aquel consejo barato a Caspar Goodwood, quien en el acto pareció envejecer treinta años. No obstante, Henrietta empezó a caminar a su lado como si acabara de transmitirle el secreto de la paciencia.

Epílogo

Retrato de una dama (1881) es una de las grandes novelas de la literatura. Tiene tal alcance y diversidad de personajes, lugares, tonos y sentimientos, y cubre tantos años, que los lectores se ven progresivamente entretenidos, atrapados, emocionados, conmovidos y desafiados por su creciente complejidad, y muchos se sienten empujados a volver a ella una y otra vez. Su «heroína de voz clara y movimiento rápido y ruidoso», la joven norteamericana en Europa Isabel Archer, es un personaje poderosamente cautivador: con la misma nobleza idealista de la Dorothea Brooke de George Eliot en *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), con el mismo egotismo juvenil que la Emma Woodhouse de Jane Austen, y tan inquieta y llena de contradicciones que dota a la novela de una fuerza y unas implicaciones que se prolongan más allá de su controvertido y analizadísimo final. *Retrato de una dama* presenta también a uno de los mayores villanos de ficción. Entre las obras de James, solo las novelas cortas *Daisy Miller* (1878) y *Otra vuelta de tuerca* (1898) rivalizan con ella en popularidad; y sus logros superan a los de estas relativas miniaturas en variedad, riqueza de textura y «grandiosidad arquitectónica» (por tomar prestada una expresión de la novela). Además, es altamente accesible, ingeniosa, discursiva y extensa a la manera de las novelas victorianas en tres volúmenes a cuya forma se ajusta superficialmente.

Retrato de una dama responde en parte, y busca un modo acorde, a su momento histórico. Tras la guerra de Secesión (1861-1865), en plena *Gilded Age* norteamericana, en una época de industrialización y democratización crecientes, la novela representa un diálogo entre las certidumbres victorianas y las dudas modernistas, abordando como aborda los nuevos desplazamientos que trajeron los ferrocarriles, los barcos de vapor y los telegramas. En esta novela, impresa aquí a partir de la edición revisada por el autor, James reúne de una manera novedosa diferentes mundos, perspectivas, tradiciones, valores, negociando entre lo que podría verse en términos generales como el pasado europeo de la inmovilidad y la jerarquía social y el futuro norteamericano de la expansión industrial y territorial.

A pesar de la relativa familiaridad de su moderno contexto, *Retrato de una dama* no ejercería un influjo tan persistente en nosotros (y no habría inspirado a los filósofos morales) si no hiciera frente también a cuestiones filosóficas más amplias, más generales, de un modo que puede recordar a una obra anterior, *La historia de Rasselas, príncipe de Abisinia* (1759) de Samuel Johnson, una gran fábula sombría cuyo héroe epónimo fracasa repetidamente en su empeño por descubrir el secreto de la vida feliz. La noción de Johnson de la «opción de vida» no es tan abierta como la de James, en especial para las mujeres, y su sentir respecto a la vanidad de los deseos humanos es considerablemente más desalentador. El interés de James en *Retrato de una dama*, que comulga más que Johnson con el anhelo y la aspiración romántica y con el deseo de «vivir» en cierto sentido pleno o abstracto, se centra por encima de todo en el lugar que ocupa la imaginación en la vida humana cuando uno trata de encontrar un camino, o un lugar, en el mundo. En cuanto a los personajes llenos de aspiraciones de *Rasselas,* al final, «De esos deseos que se habían formado, sabían con certeza que ninguno obtendrían» (capítulo 49). Una versión atemperada de la decepcionante lección de Johnson es aplicable de todos modos en James: el encuentro entre la imaginación intrépida e inexperta, encarnada aquí en Isabel, y el mundo real y finito de lo concreto y lo escalofriantemente distinto puede ser un choque doloroso, y también lleno de peligros. La imaginación de Isabel aparece descrita de buen principio como «activa hasta el absurdo», una imaginación que «se avivaba ante la mención de grandes hazañas»: «La joven tenía cierta nobleza de imaginación que le prestaba no pocos buenos servicios y que le jugaba no pocas malas pasadas». Su actitud es conscientemente optimista, nos dice James: «[…] estaba resuelta a ver el mundo como un lugar radiante, de libre expansión, de acción irresistible». Es esa imaginación que la «elevaba» la que atrae a su primo inválido, Ralph Touchett, y lo lleva a disponer que Isabel reciba una herencia considerable: «Para mí la gente es rica cuando cuenta con la posibilidad de satisfacer las exigencias de su imaginación, e Isabel cuenta con una gran imaginación».

Pero es esta imaginación decidida que se deleita en sí misma la que, después de haber llevado a Isabel a rechazar a otros pretendientes, convierte a Gilbert Osmond en una figura fatalmente tentadora para ella, por aburrido que sea tanto en apariencia como en el relato con el que se presenta a sí mismo, pues «su imaginación se encargó de suplir el

elemento humano que estaba convencida que no había faltado». Osmond la halaga diciéndole que la admira por ser «la mujer más imaginativa que había conocido jamás», y ella acaba reflexionando, con tristeza, que «Bien podría haber sido verdad, pues [...] su imaginación había construido un mundo hecho de cosas insustanciales». Su imaginación deforma la interpretación que hace de él: «Había concebido una idea mucho más maravillosa de lo que él era en realidad». Osmond, por su parte, no carece de imaginación, a su manera: a Caspar Goodwood, el tenaz pretendiente norteamericano de Isabel, la malicia de ese hombre de cara insulsa lo lleva a pensar que posee «una especie de imaginación demoníaca».

Sin imaginación, según esta novela, la vida no tiene mucho sentido. Para empezar, es el medio en el que se desarrollan nuestras relaciones con los otros (no podemos *conocer* sus pensamientos y sentimientos: tenemos que imaginarlos empáticamente). Incluso Caspar Goodwood, dice James, «aunque se suponía que era un hombre de escasa imaginación, tenía la suficiente para ponerse en el lugar de un pobre caballero que yacía moribundo en una pensión romana». La imaginación de la señora Touchett, la pragmática tía de Isabel, «no era de las que comulgan con lo que no se ve», y ejemplifica la esterilidad de una perspectiva estrecha de miras y restringida por el egoísmo. Comprende demasiado tarde que, evitando comprometerse emocionalmente, «se había perdido algo importante» , de modo que cuando muere su hijo, «su agudo y pálido rostro [adopta] una expresión que resultaba terrible». Algunas veces la imaginación nos permite ver lo que otros pasan por alto; otras, nos hace ver lo que no está ahí; juega con nosotros o nos pone trampas. No hay escapatoria a esta paradoja.

Al emprender *Retrato de una dama*, James recopiló conscientemente muchas de sus experiencias vitales y de sus logros artísticos previos, y se propuso de manera deliberada componer una obra maestra, una «»gran novela»», como la definió en julio de 1878 entre unas comillas cautelosamente irónicas.[1] También se inspiró en recuerdos íntimos, atesorados. En el prefacio a la edición neoyorquina de la novela de 1908, James recuerda que el «primer paso» hacia *Retrato de una dama* fue «el control de un único personaje» que «estaba en completa posesión de él [...] desde hacía largo tiempo, que esto me lo había hecho familiar sin por ello desdibujar su encanto, y que, con toda urgencia y con todo tormento, lo veía en movimiento y, por así decirlo, en tránsito». La heroína de James, ese «único personaje», aunque el prefacio no lo diga, estaba basado, o inspirado, en la fallecida Minny Temple, la prima de James, que había muerto en 1870 de tuberculosis en New Rochelle, Nueva York. James la apreciaba especialmente por lo que denomina en una carta que escribió a su hermano William el 8 de marzo, el día en que murió, su «espontaneidad moral»,[2] algo de lo que, dice, carecen lamentablemente las chicas inglesas. James estaba en Malvern cuando se enteró de la muerte de su prima, y se sintió empujado a escribir a su familia una extraordinaria serie de cartas conmocionadas y tiernas en las que expresaba un «intenso dolor» y se consolaba pensando que «Lo que fue vida una vez es siempre vida, en una forma u otra», y en las que negaba además que hubiese estado enamorado de ella: «Nunca lo estuve».[3] Afirmaba también que «Nadie que llegara a conocerla podía dejar de ver el futuro como un problema tristemente irresoluble».[4] Un «problema» del que *Retrato de una dama* puede leerse como una expresión, aunque quizá no como una solución.

Que Isabel Archer estaba inspirada en Minny es algo que James le reconoce explícitamente, con una salvedad importante, a su amiga Grace Norton el 28 de diciembre de 1880:

> Aciertas y a la vez te equivocas respecto a Minny Temple. La tenía en mente y hay en la heroína una inyección considerable de mi impresión de su extraordinaria naturaleza. Pero no es un retrato. La pobre Minny estaba en esencia incompleta, y yo he intentado que mi joven sea más redonda, más acabada.[5]

Es un *Retrato,* por tanto, pero no retrataba a Minny en modo sencillo alguno: como había dicho poco antes James en su biografía crítica de *Hawthorne,* de 1879, «No hay ninguna rigurosidad en la representación que ofrecen los novelistas de las personas que los han impresionado en la vida, y puede no haber ninguna en la naturaleza de las cosas».[6] Para empezar, la inteligentísima, excitable, idealista, mordaz, inquieta y apasionadamente impulsiva Minny Temple murió sin llegar a ver Europa, aunque lo deseaba con todas sus fuerzas y estuvo haciendo planes, hasta el mismo final, de viajar allí y reunirse con James. Sin embargo, imaginar a personajes como Minny Temple frente a Europa era exactamente una de las formas en que James trataba de sobreponerse a la pérdida de su querida prima, «en esencia *incompleta*». Cuando murió, James le contó por carta a su madre que el pensamiento de Minny había sido para él «un sutil incentivo para la acción y la iniciativa», y le decía que «Había tantas cosas que pensé contarle, tantas

historias con las que me hacía ilusión compensarla por lo que le faltaba».[7] Después de morir, las «historias» con las que James iba a «compensarla por lo que le faltaba» se convirtieron en historias en las que imaginaba su problemático futuro consumado, llevando a personajes como Minny, figuras de «espontaneidad moral», a una Europa que resultaba ella misma problemática, en relatos como «Madame de Mauves» (1874), «Cuatro encuentros» (1877), «Daisy Miller» (1878) y «Un episodio internacional» (1879), y posteriormente, a una grandiosa escala trágica, *Las alas de la paloma* (1902), donde ese sino terrible y prematuro se convierte en parte de la historia.

Cuando veía «su futuro como [...] un problema tristemente irresoluble», James pensaba de manera inevitable en el matrimonio. Al igual que otras chicas norteamericanas inteligentes y educadas de su época, Minny, con esa energía suya, rebelde e inquisitiva, no estaba hecha, ni mucho menos, para ser una esposa victoriana convencional, el «ángel del hogar» de algún hombre. Ese «error tan generoso» que es el matrimonio de Isabel parece ser resultado directo de la «espontaneidad moral», de una impulsividad noble y algo calculada, semejante a la de Minny; el sufrimiento de Isabel es algo de lo que Minny se libra gracias a su muerte prematura. James le decía a William que «supone un verdadero alivio pensar que ha sido apartada del trato drástico que se dispensaba a sí misma y puesta en manos más amables»;[8] en la novela, cuando Isabel decide casarse con Osmond, se la describe como si hubiera «vislumbrado, en su opinión, cuál era la línea heroica que debía seguir y deseosa de avanzar en esa dirección». Sin duda, debía de haber manos más amables que las de Gilbert Osmond.

James cuela además otras referencias privadas a personas y lugares que conocía. En *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), por ejemplo, recordaba que en líneas generales había basado a Gilbert y a Pansy Osmond en sus buenos amigos, padre e hija, Francis y Lizzie Boott: «[…] un norteamericano afligido e italianizado con una hija menuda a la que ha moldeado, y una enorme y antigua residencia toscana como escenario».[9] Fue en Florencia donde la novela empezó realmente su andadura, como recordaba James en su diario el 25 de noviembre de 1881: «En el Hotel de l'Arno, en una habitación de ese profundo recoveco, en el frente, comencé *Retrato de una dama*; es decir, retomé y volví a trabajar sobre un antiguo comienzo, escrito tiempo antes».[10] Y podemos deducir que es casi con toda seguridad el hotel en el que James hace alojarse a Caspar Goodwood en el capítulo 44, en el Lungarno degli Acciaiuoli.

Y Roma, que afectó profundamente a James, en esta novela representa ante todo la vívida «sensación de un pasado humano poderoso»; su cualidad sublime es una piedra de toque para los personajes. Para Isabel, «tan proclive [...] a tener una revelación espiritual», «allí había historia en los adoquines de la calle y en los átomos de la luz del sol»; mientras que para Osmond, la enorme basílica de San Pedro «Es demasiado grande; hace que uno se sienta como un átomo». Cuando la desgraciada Isabel, comprendiendo que ha sido manipulada para contraer un nefasto matrimonio, se ve asaltada por una «obsesiva noción de la continuidad del destino humano», recurre a un rincón concreto de Roma sobre el que James había escrito, en uno de sus numerosos apuntes de viaje italianos, parte del propio pasado humano y de la propia noción del poder de la historia de este. En la novela es «un asiento en el parapeto bajo que bordea el ancho terreno cubierto de hierba que hay delante de la alta y fría fachada de San Juan de Letrán, desde donde se puede contemplar al fondo de la Campania la lejana silueta del monte Albano, así como la imponente llanura que sigue tan llena de todo lo que se ha esfumado de ella». En *Vacaciones en Roma,* en julio de 1873, James evoca vívidamente, en unos términos que parecen resonar en la novela, los motivos por los que esta área en torno a San Juan de Letrán era uno de sus lugares favoritos:

> […] la arquitectura tiene un aire enormemente teatral. Es imponente en extremo, solo la de San Pedro lo es más [...] La vista desde el vasto espacio que se extiende desde los peldaños de la iglesia hasta el muro de la ciudad es la reina de las vistas [...] Delante queda la puerta de la ciudad que va a dar [...] a la larga y desolada hilera de arcos del acueducto claudiano, con su relieve dentado extendiéndose como la columna vertebral de un esqueleto monstruoso y derruido.[11]

La imagen de los arcos dentados del acueducto evocando la espina dorsal de un antiguo y enorme dinosaurio parece estar detrás de esa descripción paradójica y elegíaca de la Campania, «tan llena de todo lo que se ha esfumado de ella», que aquí tal vez se aplique al desastroso matrimonio de Isabel.

Se ha escrito mucho acerca de las raíces literarias de *Retrato de una dama*. Dentro de la propia obra de James, la relación padre e hija de Osmond y Pansy recuerda a la reciente *Washington Square* (1880), que se centraba en el duelo de voluntades que mantenían el agudo y tiránico doctor Sloper y su hija Catherine a causa de los planes de boda de esta; así como al argumento de *El americano* (1877), en la que el héroe, Christopher Newman, trataba de arrancar a su amada Claire de Cintré de una familia dictatorial, que se reproduce aquí a menor escala con Pansy y su frustrado

pretendiente Ned Rosier (el convento aparece de nuevo). Pero James era también un gran crítico y lector, y un apropiador lleno de inventiva: se han identificado numerosas fuentes literarias externas en la novela. Los críticos de la época repararon en el marcado parecido entre Osmond, el escalofriante diletante con el que se casa Isabel, y el horrible Grandcourt, un torturador emocional indolente y de voz lánguida con el que Gwendolen, la heroína imperfecta de George Eliot, comete el error de casarse en Daniel Deronda (1876). *El fauno de mármol* (1860), un relato romano sobre la inocencia y la culpa americanas escrito por Nathaniel Hawthorne, obra pionera de la narrativa «internacional», aporta modelos para el tratamiento, las situaciones y la ambientación; en el capítulo 28, James sitúa una escena en la misma sala de los Museos Capitalinos donde arrancaba la acción de Hawthorne. *Retrato de una dama* es asimismo la enmienda de James, o el antídoto, al tratamiento magnífico, atroz y sistemáticamente reduccionista, por parte de Gustave Flaubert, de su heroína en *Madame Bovary* (1857). También resuenan en la novela los ecos del gran monólogo dramático de Robert Browning, «My Last Duchess» (1842), con ese marido tiránico y arrogante (volveremos a ello más adelante). Un especialista ha señalado como fuente *La novela de una mujer honrada* (1866), del escritor suizo Victor Cherbuliez, cuya heroína lleva el nombre de Isabel.[12] La madre de Gilbert Osmond, conocida como «la Corinne americana», bien podría estar inspirada en la extraordinaria escritora estadounidense Margaret Fuller (1810-1850).[13] Y un estudioso con iniciativa ha descubierto un relato didáctico titulado «Isabel Archer», escrito por un tal «Profesor Alden, D. D.» y publicado en la revista *The Ladies' Wreath* en 1848-1849, en el que la heroína hace caso omiso de los consejos de sus amigos y se casa, desafortunadamente, con un hipócrita desalmado.[14]

En el prefacio, James vuelve la vista hacia el origen de *Retrato de una dama* —en «el control de un único personaje» y «la idea de cierta joven que se enfrenta a su destino»— y se pregunta cómo «la mera sombra tenue de una joven inteligente aunque presuntuosa» podía justificar una novela de tamaña escala. Como dice, «La novela es por propia naturaleza una "agitación" [*ado*], una agitación a raíz de algo, y cuanto mayor sea la forma que adopte, mayor será, claro está, dicha agitación». El juego que hace James aquí con esa *ado* shakesperiana parece incitarnos a pensar que una novela dedicada a Isabel Archer tal vez fuera *much ado about nothing* [mucho ruido y pocas nueces]. Pero para rebatir esa duda, cita la reflexión tácitamente feminista de George Eliot sobre las chicas como su heroína Gwendolen Harleth en *Daniel Deronda*: «En estas frágiles vasijas se conserva a través de los tiempos el tesoro del afecto humano». Isabel es un centro de valor, a pesar de toda su ignorancia y su egotismo, y en la novela sentimos que su destino importa, no solo a ella misma, sino a su círculo de amigos y admiradores.

Que Isabel es el foco de interés como fin en sí misma, y no solo como portadora de afecto humano de generación en generación, se manifiesta en el hecho de que su matrimonio no es, decididamente, el final feliz de su historia (algo en lo que recuerda a Gwendolen); y tal vez también en la pérdida de su hijo de seis meses, tratada muy de pasada (y que los lectores quizá consideren parte de su proceso de alejamiento de Osmond). Isabel es un retrato psicológico, y se nos presenta como un objeto de difícil interpretación. Su cuñado, Edmund Ludlow, no es el único que siente que «Isabel está escrita en un idioma extranjero. Yo no la entiendo». Porque ella tampoco acaba de entenderse a sí misma; de hecho, en alguna ocasión, como cuando rechaza a lord Warburton, siente «verdadero miedo de sí misma». Su complejidad psicológica es en sí misma una fuente de intriga. La centralidad que se otorga insistentemente a Isabel enlaza con la insistencia democrática en la importancia de las personas y los temas que tradicionalmente se han considerado triviales, propia de la poesía romántica (en particular, la de Wordsworth); y con la insistencia derivada, propia de la novela realista, en la relevancia de las vidas corrientes. Pero aquí se le aplica un giro específicamente norteamericano. Mientras planificaba la novela en 1876, justo después de terminar *El americano,* James, en broma, se había referido al libro como «una *Americana:* las aventuras en Europa de una Newman femenina que, por descontado, triunfa de igual modo frente al insolente extranjero».[15]

En la paradójica tradición norteamericana, esta heroína es representativa por cuanto es excepcional: Isabel es consciente de sí misma en tanto que heroína, tiene teorías sobre sí misma y sobre la vida. Esta opresiva conciencia de sí misma amenaza con cortocircuitar los procesos del instinto y el juicio. Es consciente hasta del hecho de ser demasiado consciente, demasiado abstracta —«Dicen que tengo demasiadas teorías»—, y esta autoconciencia misma es una de las cosas que la empujan a las «complicaciones» del matrimonio con Osmond, en un intento de hacer realidad sus ideales, de ponerlos en práctica. Este matrimonio, que es además en sí mismo un intento de dar con una forma concreta para sus aspiraciones, refleja la forma en que su «nobleza de imaginación [...] le jugaba no pocas malas pasadas»; la muestra tratando de hacer realidad sus elevadas teorías en las relaciones íntimas humanas sin

contar con una base suficientemente firme. Según Ralph, «Era muy propio de ella que, tras haberse inventado una bella teoría acerca de Gilbert Osmond, le amara no por lo que poseía en realidad, sino por sus propias carencias que ella transformaba en honores».

A diferencia de la Emma Bovary de Flaubert, Isabel es lectora no tanto de novelas pasionales sino más bien de tomos serios y «teóricos»: la primera vez que la vemos está leyendo con empeño, o «avanzando con dificultad por los arenosos territorios de una historia del pensamiento alemán», y más adelante, Ralph le da «un libro de Ampère», posiblemente el imponente *Essai sur la philosophie des sciences* (1834). Pero a pesar de esa «reputación de lectora empedernida», los libros no le bastan una vez se lanza al proyecto de «ver la vida»: descubrimos que «en realidad prefería casi cualquier otra fuente de información a la página impresa». Repetidas veces a lo largo de la novela la vemos esforzándose demasiado por concentrarse en la lectura (como le ocurre a Dorothea en *Middlemarch*): la descubrimos «tratando de enfrascarse [...] en la lectura de un volumen [pero] no lograba leer otras palabras que unas que no estaban impresas en la página»; «[…] cogió su libro, aunque sin hacer nada por abrirlo»; «[…] se encontraba sentada en la biblioteca con un volumen al que no prestaba atención»; «Estaba preocupada, demasiado impaciente para sentarse, para trabajar, para leer»; «[…] al tiempo que apartaba el libro que había estado leyendo»; un desvío de la atención que culmina cerca del final: «[…] nunca le había interesado tan poco la literatura como en esos días [...] No podía leer, ya que nunca se había sentido tan incapaz de centrar su atención». Si a Isabel le «apasiona el saber», no es, en primer lugar, el saber que se obtiene de los libros, sino de la vida. Cuando rechaza a lord Warburton, se descubre expresando una idea de su destino, de su misión:

> Se trata de que no puedo escapar a mi destino [...] Casarme con usted sería tratar de escapar [...] Mi destino no es renunciar… [...] No puedo escapar a la infelicidad. Si me casase con usted, estaría intentando hacerlo [...] jamás alcanzaré la felicidad por medios extraordinarios, huyendo, apartándome [...] De la vida. De las oportunidades y de los riesgos habituales, de aquello que la mayoría de la gente experimenta y sufre.

El *Retrato* que hace James de ella es, por tanto, un libro que se aparta de los libros, que destaca el giro que da su heroína para abrazar la vida, la pasión y el compromiso, y se hace así con un poder inmenso.

El *Retrato* (como sugeriría el título) se interesa también por los cuadros y los objetos artísticos en cuanto a su relación con la vida. En un sentido u otro, muchos de sus personajes —Ralph Touchett, Ned Rosier, la propia madame Merle— son coleccionistas. Hasta Isabel se convierte en algo así como una coleccionista —aunque de experiencias, y no de objetos—, y adopta una actitud altanera y crítica de entendida a la que se ve alentada por su amistad con la aparentemente refinada madame Merle, un modelo de conducta cuestionable. («¡Cuánto me gustaría ser así!», dice Isabel para sus adentros a propósito de la «gran dama»; una encarnación, cree ella, de la «posición aristocrática». De hecho, esto es parte del atractivo de Osmond para Isabel, fundado en la insinuante recomendación de madame Merle, que lo presenta como «un hombre nacido para sobresalir»; a diferencia de sus otros amigos, no da la impresión de pertenecer a un tipo determinado, parece un caso único con el valor enorme de una rareza: «Para quien su mente no tenía un lugar natural era para el señor Osmond: era un espécimen aparte». En realidad, resulta que pertenece a una clase desgraciadamente corriente, la del arribista mercenario: es *ella* la que pasa a formar parte de su colección, y la que le permite ampliarla con su dinero.

Dado que el principal coleccionista de la novela es el estremecedor Gilbert Osmond, podríamos sentirnos tentados a considerar todo coleccionismo algo siniestro, o al menos grotesco. Pero hay que marcar diferencias cruciales entre las distintas clases de coleccionismo, y entre las actitudes que las impulsan. Las prioridades de Ralph, cuando se trata de escoger, son por completo humanas; como cuando visita con Isabel la galería de cuadros de Gardencourt: se descubre «con la mirada puesta no tanto en los cuadros como en la figura de la joven [...] ya que ella era mucho más merecedora de su atención que la mayoría de aquellas obras de arte». (Por descontado, podemos pensar que, en cierto modo, Isabel es una «obra de arte» en tanto en cuanto es una creación literaria de Henry James, cuidadosamente enmarcada en *Retrato de una dama*; y la paradoja de que la obra de arte que nos tiene absorbidos prefiera la vida al arte es tremendamente sugerente.) El propio Ralph, tan enfermo que no puede aspirar a reclamar activamente el amor de Isabel, puede entenderse como un modelo para el lector por su postura de devoto «espectador» de Isabel: la ama, pero «sin esperanza alguna», «de manera desinteresada». «Lo que mantenía a Ralph con vida era sencillamente el hecho de que todavía no había visto bastante de la persona que más le interesaba del mundo, por lo que todavía no

estaba satisfecho [...] Ese era solo el primer acto del drama, y Ralph estaba decidido a ver la representación hasta el final». El interés de Ralph quizá funcionara como un ejemplo alentador para los lectores de las entregas de la novela, que debían mantener la atención de mes en mes; este espectador moribundo que observa desde los márgenes, aferrándose a la vida para ver cómo termina la historia, ejemplifica la curiosidad humana, entretenida al tiempo que compasiva y entregada. No puede decirse lo mismo de Gilbert Osmond, al que Ralph llama (con intención restrictiva) «la encarnación del buen gusto».

No es que Osmond se nos muestre desde el principio bajo una luz desfavorable. Al fin y al cabo, necesitamos sentir cierta identificación con la atracción inicial que siente Isabel por él. Osmond expresa muy al comienzo un ideal al que ella responde intensamente: «[…] uno debe hacer de su propia vida una obra de arte», le dice. Su casa, una mezcla ingeniosa de antiguo y moderno, con su «laca antigua» y «las mullidas butacas de asientos hondos» —«Es un genio de los tapizados», comenta Isabel resentida después de casarse—, da muestra de «una decoración estudiada al detalle y un refinamiento sin tapujos».

La idea de que «uno debe hacer de su propia vida una obra de arte» se asocia particularmente con un movimiento cultural que estaba cobrando fuerza en el período en que se sitúa *Retrato de una dama*, entre comienzos y mediados de la década 1870-1880. James había leído los controvertidos *Estudios sobre la historia del Renacimiento* de Walter Pater, publicados por primera vez en 1873, y estaba al tanto, desde una afín distancia, del movimiento estético que lo adoptaría como su texto fundamental. Gracias a sus profundos conocimientos de la literatura y la cultura francesas, James había leído ya las obras de Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), autor de la expresión «*L'art pour l'art*» (el arte por el arte), que se convirtió en el lema de un proceso creativo que no se justificaba a sí mismo por su relación utilitaria con ningún propósito de mejora social ni con ningún código moral más elevado, sino que desafiaba el moralismo burgués situando la belleza por encima de cualquier otro valor. El retrato de Gilbert Osmond es en parte una sátira de la figura del esteta, si bien James no etiqueta de estetas a sus personajes, y tampoco dispone la acción como una especie de caso con que sentar precedente sobre el esteticismo.

La acción de *Retrato de una dama* puede interpretarse como un cuestionamiento, no tanto de lo deseable de una vida vivida «por amor al arte», sino de lo *factible* de esta, y lo hace penetrando bajo las poses de Serena Merle y Gilbert Osmond en particular, para mostrar qué se oculta bajo la superficie. A pesar de que no hay muchas discusiones explícitas sobre la doctrina artística, encontramos una sugerente mención casual del esteticismo cuando Isabel, bastante avanzada la novela, reflexiona sobre de qué manera su matrimonio con Osmond fue obra de madame Merle: «Había personas que sentían una gran pasión por ser casamenteras, como los devotos del arte la sienten por el arte, pero madame Merle, aun siendo una gran artista, no era una de ellas». La traicionera amiga de Isabel ha sido presentada desde el principio como una «artista», tocando Schubert al piano en Gardencourt: «[…] tocaba como una artista». Aquí el análisis de Isabel marca unos límites muy serios a su apreciación de madame Merle, cuya habilidad artística acaba resultando siniestra y ni mucho menos desinteresada: la creación de ese matrimonio no es una obra de arte por amor al arte, ni en pos de la belleza; se lleva a cabo, más bien, «con la intención de ganar algo» .

El «gusto», sin embargo, interesaba también al propio James, que le presta a Osmond parte de su deleite en la belleza y el arte. Osmond le dice a Isabel que la perspectiva de casarse con ella lo ha ayudado a comprender verdaderamente «el libro de la vida»: «[…] ahora que lo puedo leer como es debido, compruebo que es una historia encantadora [...] cómo la vida parece extenderse ante nosotros, qué larga tarde de verano nos aguarda». Años después, Edith Wharton, amiga del creador de Osmond, recordaba cómo James había escogido estas palabras exactas como conclusión a una idílica excursión al castillo de Bodiam: «James se volvió hacia mí y dijo con solemnidad: "Tarde de verano... Tarde de verano; esas me han parecido siempre las palabras más hermosas de la lengua inglesa"».[16] Cuando la actitud de Osmond hacia su hija presenta este mismo reflejo apreciativo —Isabel lo llama su «visión artística, plástica [...] de la inocencia de Pansy» — se destaca el contraste con la respuesta de la propia Isabel (cuya «apreciación era [...] de carácter más moral», pero podría verse como algo similar al inevitable «deleite estético» de un novelista con las cualidades de sus personajes. ¿Es moralmente inadmisible disfrutar de la belleza, física o moral, de otras personas? Lo que Osmond reivindica no es, para James, necesariamente innoble.

No obstante, las pretensiones de Osmond de un elevado desinterés se acaban demostrando falsas —«Todo lo que hacía Osmond era una pose» —, y este no tiene nada de la generosidad de su autor: como afirma su hermana, la condesa Gemini, «es incapaz de amar a nadie». Recuerda, tanto si el poema es en efecto una fuente del *Retrato de una dama* como si no, al duque renacentista italiano del monólogo dramático de Browning «My Last Duchess» (1842), una figura de tiranía artístico-marital que alardea impenitente de la supresión de los instintos espontáneos y democráticos

y de las pródigas sonrisas de su joven esposa, ahora muerta: «Di órdenes / Y cesó toda sonrisa». El duque ha convertido a su esposa en su retrato: «Pintado en la pared / pareciera que está viva».[17] Cuando, en Roma, en una de las veladas de los jueves de Osmond, vemos a Isabel desde fuera, «enmarcada en el dorado umbral […] el vivo retrato de una distinguida dama», el título del libro parece consumarse: Isabel ya no es una niña, y en ese contexto reluciente hasta el umbral es «dorado», como el marco de un antiguo maestro. Pero cuando descubrimos las profundidades de su tristeza y los motivos de esta, comprendemos con cuánta astucia han dispuesto Osmond y su falsa amiga Merle ese marco en el que ha quedado atrapada. El último tramo de la novela recorre su toma de conciencia de la trampa y su resistencia a ella.

James construye a su heroína como un emblema de la incipiente seguridad norteamericana en uno mismo («[…] le tengo mucho aprecio a mi libertad»; propensa, como su país natal, a las declaraciones de independencia. «“Si hay algo en el mundo que de verdad estimo —prosiguió empleando de nuevo un ligero tono altisonante— es mi independencia personal”». Isabel es extraordinaria, temperamental y representativamente *libre,* sin cargas familiares y lo bastante adinerada como para permitirse hacer con su vida exactamente lo que quiera. La acción de la novela, por tanto, constituye en parte un caso para sentar precedente en torno a la cuestión de la libertad. James siente afinidad hacia esta idea, al tiempo que ve, podría decirse, sus dificultades prácticas, su imposibilidad, incluso. A este respecto, encontramos reveladores ecos de *Retrato de una dama* en el gran ensayo crítico de James «El arte de la ficción», de 1884, un alegato a favor de la libertad de la novela, en respuesta a otro ensayo con el mismo título, escrito por un novelista victoriano del montón, Walter Besant (1836-1901), que había propuesto varias reglas de carácter práctico para escribir novelas. El desacuerdo de James es de base: «Me parece que yerra al tratar de afirmar tan categóricamente de antemano en qué va a consistir una buena novela». Al pretender sentar el asunto «tan categóricamente de antemano», al dar por hecho que la labor de la novela con respecto a las cosas que nos rodean es «convertirlas en moldes convencionales y tradicionales»,[18] en palabras de James, Besant está poniendo trabas a la libertad de la novela como forma, a las posibilidades experimentales de las que surgió y que, de hecho, podría decirse que le dieron su nombre. Este carácter prescriptivo y la adhesión a las convenciones podrían alinear a Besant con Gilbert Osmond, el cual afirma, como es bien sabido: «[…] soy la convención personificada». Osmond considera que Isabel tiene «demasiadas ideas». Besant piensa lo mismo de la novela, sostiene James: le desagrada su «libertad de sentir y expresar».[19] Según afirma este, de modo estimulante: «Marcar una línea que debe seguirse, un tono que debe adoptarse, o un formulario que debe rellenarse es una limitación de esa libertad [de sentir y expresar] y la eliminación de aquello que nos despierta precisamente más curiosidad».[20]

La imposición de las normas convencionales en su matrimonio por parte de Osmond a Isabel puede interpretarse, por tanto, como «la eliminación de aquello que nos despierta precisamente más curiosidad»; esto es, en la medida en que sentimos por ella una curiosidad como la de Ralph. Osmond y Ralph se contraponen explícitamente: Osmond «no quería que ella tuviese libertad de pensamiento, y sabía muy bien que Ralph era un apóstol de la libertad». La visión que tiene Osmond del matrimonio como «un formulario que debe rellenarse» recuerda a la *convencionalización* de la novela que James ataca en su ensayo. James afirma que «una novela es una criatura viva» —igual que lo es un personaje de ficción como Isabel—, y que obligar a la novela a convenir con la tradición «condena al arte a la eterna repetición de un puñado de tópicos comunes, bloquea su desarrollo y nos lleva de cabeza a una pared ciega».[21] La misma imagen aparece en *Retrato de una dama* (un libro plagado de metáforas arquitectónicas de estados mentales) para representar el horror de Isabel en el capítulo 42 al verse aprisionada en el «rígido sistema» de Osmond: «[…] había descubierto que el panorama infinito de la vida que se desplegaba ante ella no era más que un callejón oscuro y angosto con una pared ciega al final». El destino de Isabel podría ser un símbolo de cómo la libertad de visión de la novela queda condenada, bloqueada y enfrentada a esa «pared ciega»; como dice Ralph: «Querías ver la vida por ti misma, pero no te lo permitieron… y te castigaron por tener ese deseo. Te han obligado a llevar una existencia convencional». Isabel, como afirma Ralph, empieza queriendo ver la vida, «explorar todas sus posibilidades», que es exactamente lo que, en «El arte de la ficción», James defiende que debería hacer la novela: «La esencia de la energía moral consiste en explorar todas las posibilidades».[22]

Retrato de una dama es, por su originalidad y su libertad de representación, uno de los grandes retratos de un matrimonio infeliz que ha dado el arte, y concibe con una sutileza magnífica los efectos estremecedores de las actitudes autoritarias y patriarcales tal como las asume un expatriado norteamericano, un farsante más papista que el

Papa. Osmond es uno de los grandes villanos reales de la narrativa; un villano que no presenta ninguna de las cualidades melodramáticas habituales, como la lujuria o la violencia, sino que se alza como la encarnación de una malignidad silenciosa y despiadada, impulsada por la complacencia en su poder sobre los demás. De hecho, en la novela se lo vincula con el «mal», si bien solo indirectamente: «Era como si Osmond llevara consigo el mal de ojo, como si su presencia fuera la peste y su favor una desgracia»; y también se dice de él, en un contexto todavía inocente: «Aunque personalmente no fuese excesivo en sus efusiones, sí era, en cambio, profundo». La alusión, en esta novela sorprendentemente llena de ecos poéticos, remite a *Macbeth,* V-iii, 22-28; al estudio del mal más profundo de Shakespeare, donde el desdichado protagonista se lamenta de que no tiene amistades sinceras, solo «maldiciones ahogadas pero muy profundas, servil adulación, palabras que el pobre corazón quiere negar sin atreverse».[23] Osmond tiene un enorme don para el desprecio y el comentario mordaz; en un solo fragmento de monólogo, por ejemplo, se las apaña para ningunear a Ralph Touchett, a lord Warburton y a la periodista Henrietta Stackpole, amiga de Isabel. Y aun así, mediante fríos cálculos, consigue ocupar siempre la posición de superioridad moral —«él nunca […] cometería ninguna equivocación»—, por lo que la pobre Isabel acaba enmarañada una y otra vez, no solo en los tejemanejes de Osmond, sino en su propio idealismo, que él consigue volver en su contra. Así pues, cuando en el capítulo 51 Osmond afirma hipócritamente, en relación con su matrimonio: «¡[…] lo que más valoro en la vida es que uno cumpla su palabra!», Isabel pierde ímpetu en el acto, frenada en su movimiento de justo desafío:

> […] la determinación con que esta había entrado en la habitación se vio atrapada en una maraña de finos hilos. Sus últimas palabras no eran una orden, constituían una especie de apelación y, aunque ella sabía que cualquier manifestación de respeto por parte de él solo podía ser una rebuscada forma de egoísmo, no dejaban de representar algo trascendente y absoluto, como la señal de la cruz o la bandera del propio país.

Para Isabel, «el matrimonio significaba que la mujer debía ser fiel al hombre», por lo que estos falsos principios, este respeto de boquilla al matrimonio como sacramento supremo, dan en el blanco. Isabel y Osmond han tratado de hacer del suyo un matrimonio ejemplar, una obra de arte en sí mismo: «Solo habían perseguido una cosa, pero esta debía ser exquisita». La vergüenza por lo que considera el fracaso de ambos es paralizante, y no parece que el divorcio sea una opción para ella: «[…] no puedo hacer público mi error. No creo que sea decente». Así que las palabras de Osmond sobre el honor están pensadas para confundir la idea de justicia de Isabel. James está siempre alerta a las maneras en que las personas bienintencionadas, sensibles e inteligentes se encuentran en desventaja cuando se las enfrenta a los inmoralmente calculadores, los rotundamente faltos de imaginación o los fervientemente estúpidos. Bien podría ser en esta brillante anatomía del matrimonio, y quizá también en la forma en que el amor de Pansy es «derrotad[o]» por el ejercicio de la voluntad paterna, en lo que estuviera pensando Ezra Pound cuando en su gran ensayo sobre James de 1918 señalaba que nadie parece mencionar al «James mayor […] al enemigo de la tiranía; libro tras libro contra la opresión, contra toda opresión mezquina, personal y aplastante, la dominación de la vida moderna».[24]

No es que James condene sin rodeos al odioso opresor de Isabel; su rectitud moral rara vez se manifiesta en veredictos explícitos. Como afirma en el prefacio que escribió posteriormente para la novela, lo que importa es «la dependencia perfecta del sentido “moral” de la obra de arte, de la cantidad de vida experimentada que ha sido necesaria para producirla […] la clase y [el] grado de la sensibilidad inicial del artista», y la conexión del tema «con alguna experiencia sincera». En otras palabras, la capacidad de James para hacer que la relación íntima pero distante entre Isabel y Osmond se desarrolle de un modo que los lectores sienten como doloroso, reconocible como la vida —algo que atestigua lo hondo de su empatía y comprensión— es lo que confiere consistencia moral a la novela. Un ejemplo de paciencia sutil: la forma en que deja discurrir más de cincuenta páginas desde que nos presenta a Isabel como la señora Osmond hasta que la vemos por fin hablando con su marido; y eso solo cuando el antiguo admirador de Isabel, Warburton, entra en escena como un posible candidato para Pansy, otorgando así a Isabel el poder de incidir en el resultado de los tejemanejes de Osmond. Una vez pasamos a verlos juntos, las gélidas provocaciones de Osmond nos revelan, devastadoras, en qué se ha convertido su matrimonio, y su punzante insolencia natural —una pose de indiferencia arrogante hacia lo que piensen los demás que encubre su constante atención a la opinión que tienen de él («vivía exclusivamente para el mundo»)— aturde la candidez de espíritu de Isabel.

Según el narrador de James, un año puede comportar un aumento considerable de la gravedad; y la segunda parte del libro, que comienza tras un salto de tres años, se ensombrece en efecto magníficamente. Si el tono de la primera parte lo marcaba en parte Ralph Touchett, con su «reputación de tomárselo todo a broma», la figura dominante de la

segunda es Gilbert Osmond, y llama la atención la forma en que James cambia el registro, pasando de una ocurrente comedia social a algo que parece incorporar una concepción trágica del destino humano. La sensación de duración y la presión acumulada de la experiencia otorgan un peso a la narración que marca no solo la madurez de su heroína sino también, en términos más generales, la madurez de la novela jamesiana. James está inventando, o descubriendo, el tipo de tema y de tratamiento al que volverá más adelante, explorando y reforzando su compromiso durante el resto de su carrera, y sin duda hasta sus tres últimas grandes novelas, *Los embajadores* (1903), *Las alas de la paloma* (1902) y *La copa dorada* (1904), por presentarlas en orden de escritura, y no de publicación.

Aquí el foco de James incide en la naturaleza engañosa e inescrutable de «las apariencias» y en el estado de falsa conciencia creado para sus víctimas, inmersas en una crisis de interpretación en la que carecen de signos fiables que les marquen el camino. Isabel consigue solo gradualmente penetrar las apariencias y alcanzar un entendimiento más profundo de su situación y de cómo ha ido a parar a esta. A su manera —menos evidente que años antes con *El americano*—, la novela bebe de la tradición gótica, esa forma que noveliza el enfrentamiento entre la conciencia moderna, a menudo angloamericana, y las siniestras estructuras autoritarias y los abusos del pasado. (Como dice James, «La vieja tradición protestante nunca había desaparecido de la mente de Isabel». El significado pleno de esta diferencia de perspectivas y valores tarda un tiempo en penetrar en Isabel, y en nosotros, dado que vemos la vida con ella; la famosa conversación del capítulo 19 con madame Merle sobre cómo las apariencias absolutamente superficiales expresan el yo, nos ofrece un adelanto de lo que hay en juego, aunque, aparentemente, sin graves consecuencias. Tal vez el primer indicio de gravedad sea la distancia que siente Isabel hacia madame Merle a medida que estrecha (en sus viajes) la relación con ella, quien afirma «que pertenecía al viejo mundo». Isabel comienza a tener la sensación de que «¡[…] no me entiende!», «que en el fondo tenía una moral diferente». Isabel no calcula todavía cómo de diferente, pero esto le genera «una vaga consternación». A pesar de su carácter independiente, ha caído «bajo su influjo», un influjo manipulado activamente en interés de otros.

En el inquietante pasaje florentino (con una cuidadosa puesta en escena de James) en el que madame Merle y su viejo amigo Gilbert Osmond hablan de Isabel, ausente, la mujer declara que «Yo no pretendo saber lo que la gente se merece o no […] Lo único que sé es lo que puedo hacer con ellos». Madame Merle vive, en realidad, en un mundo de presiones sutiles. Aunque niega ante su enemiga, la condesa Gemini, a la que amenaza, que Isabel sea víctima de una coacción directa por su parte («No se la está obligando por la fuerza», resulta claro más adelante, cuando quiere que Isabel utilice su propio influjo con lord Warburton para que este proponga a Pansy en matrimonio, que hacer cosas con la gente —y empujar a la gente a hacer cosas— es su ámbito de actividad predilecto. «[…] se lo pedirá. Sobre todo […] si tú lo convences», le dice. La respuesta de Isabel es un eco asombrado: «¿Que yo lo convenza?». No es hasta más de cien páginas después, sin embargo, cuando Isabel comprende que ella misma ha sido inducida a actuar según los deseos de otros, que «Su matrimonio había sido obra de madame Merle». Isabel es «una mujer a la que han utilizado», a la que su presunta amiga ha puesto, como si fuera un objeto de cambio, en las manos del aún más siniestro Osmond, cuyas pretensiones de noble desinterés esconden sus auténticas motivaciones rastreras, como ve finalmente Isabel, horrorizada: «[…] el hombre que había creído que era el menos sórdido del mundo se había casado con ella, como un vulgar aventurero, por su dinero». Igual que ve más adelante que madame Merle la «utilizó».

Bajo el retrato que hace James de la preponderancia de la versión de las cosas de Osmond y madame Merle, se reconoce que ambos pagan en su interior un alto precio por su corrupción. Isabel llega a preguntarse de madame Merle «si se podía aplicar a esa amiga íntima desde hacía varios años el gran epíteto histórico de “malvada”». ¿Es «malvada» una etiqueta absurda? La siguiente escena de James nos muestra a madame Merle con Osmond, en un inusitado arranque emocional, declarando ella misma haber «sido muy vil esta mañana», refiriéndose a su «maldad» y admitiendo que «estaba poseída por algo maligno. O quizá fuera algo bueno, no lo sé […] me has secado el alma». Y pregunta, desesperada: «¿Cómo terminan las malas personas […]?». Puede que el indiferente Osmond y ella sean compinches en sus conspiraciones, pero no son ningún consuelo el uno para el otro, y la maternidad que madame Merle ha rechazado tan de buena gana se convierte en una fuente más bien de tormento que de solaz.

La recreación de esta mezcla paradójica de interdependencia y desprecio mutuo entre Osmond y madame Merle es un ejemplo perfecto de lo que T. S. Eliot describe en su ensayo «In Memory» (1918) como el logro genuino de James: «Es en la química de estas sustancias sutiles, de estos precipitados curiosos y estos gases explosivos que se forman repentinamente al contacto de una mente con otra donde James no tiene rival».[25] De hecho, la testigo recién citada, la supuestamente frívola condesa Gemini, dice algo con un asombroso parecido: «Yo no estoy tan segura. Son capaces de cualquier cosa, usted y Osmond. No hablo de Osmond por su cuenta, ni de usted por la suya. Pero juntos son

peligrosos… como una combinación química».

Parte del entusiasmo único que supone para nosotros descubrir al James novelista proviene de ver cómo expresa o encuentra una fórmula satisfactoria para combinaciones químicas que imaginaríamos impronunciables o intangibles, áreas de sentimiento y reflexión indescriptibles y reservadas por lo común a la poesía, demasiado profundas salvo para palabras percibidas con la mayor de las delicadezas. Su territorio, a medida que avanza su carrera, pasa a ser el de las diferencias que surgen entre las personas por la supresión de una relación, un sentimiento o un hecho, por los silencios de la traición, la sospecha y el secretismo, en particular el secretismo sexual.

Y es en *Retrato de una dama* donde James parece descubrir, progresivamente, cómo ese tema central —que incluye el tipo de revelaciones de opresión íntima y crueldad insidiosa ya mencionadas— puede tratarse sin un énfasis exagerado y sin caer en lo prosaicamente gráfico. Es una dimensión de la que Isabel va tomando conciencia a medida que la novela gana peso: una región de brechas y abismos, de paredes ciegas y relaciones ocultas. No se pone nombre a las cosas, y esa misma falta de nombre lleva a imaginar horrores: como cuando Isabel siente un «temor inefable» hacia madame Merle, quien emana a su vez «una vitalidad indescriptible» en relación con Pansy, su hija no reconocida. El silencio fundamental es ese silencio insidioso que constituye la misma base del matrimonio de Isabel, por lo que «La observación disimulada se había convertido para ella en una costumbre»: tiene que aprender a interpretar las señales, a moverse entre conjeturas y revelaciones. Es así como comprende la forma en que han tramado contra ella, y ve estremecida que «Sí, había alguna intención, la había».

Engaño, traición y sospecha se convierten en el último gran tema de James, quien desarrolla una técnica —centrada en los matices, los símbolos, la penetración psicológica, las crisis interpretativas, la detección de notas desafinadas— que saca a relucir implicaciones más profundas; un proceso que culminará veintitrés años más tarde en *La copa dorada,* donde de nuevo aparece una mujer traicionada que toma conciencia de su falsa posición. Los elementos principales de esta elaborada obra maestra están ya presentes en *Retrato de una dama*, que contiene incluso una «taza» con «una rajadura muy pequeña», en este caso un símbolo secundario, y no central. Y aquí reside el entusiasmo del descubrimiento creativo. James no es un escritor de vanguardia en el sentido habitual, pero sí es un escritor experimental, y hay numerosos momentos a lo largo de *Retrato de una dama* en los que parece recalcar de forma consciente la relevancia de lo que está haciendo, como si estuviese construyendo veladamente el manifiesto de una nueva clase de realismo. Los pequeños detalles, las insinuaciones y deducciones pacientemente acumuladas conforman, afirma James convincente, una vasta y sublime estructura, una imagen de «la verdad de las cosas». Así es, sin duda, para la consternada Isabel:

> Ahora que conocía el secreto, ahora que sabía algo que tanto la concernía y cuyo eclipse había hecho que la vida le pareciese un intento de jugar al whist con una baraja incompleta, la verdad de las cosas, las relaciones mutuas entre estas, su significado y, en buena parte, su horror, surgieron ante ella con una especie de grandiosidad arquitectónica. Recordaba infinidad de minucias que cobraban vida con la espontaneidad de un escalofrío. En su momento le habían parecido minucias, pero ahora veía que tenían gran importancia.

Desde esta posición ventajosa, las «minucias» pueden interpretarse justificadamente como cargadas de «gran importancia»: son pistas de la conspiración. Aquí, hechos profundamente relevantes cumplen su función sin ser mencionados ni destacados, en apariencia, de manera conmensurable (las muestras de emoción son reprimidas), y la narración nos pide que conectemos con estos códigos inadvertidos. Los sentimientos y las relaciones relativamente indefinidas e inexplicadas son el tema de la novela. Así, entre Isabel y Ralph «se cruzó una mirada, llena en ambos casos, pero sobre todo en el de Ralph, de declaraciones demasiado vagas para expresarlas con palabras». Un intercambio de miradas parecido tiene lugar mucho más adelante entre Isabel y Warburton; intercambio este en el que, recalca James, los significados implicados incluyen algunos de carácter inconsciente: «[…] esa breve e intensa mirada tuvo un significado más profundo de lo que ambos percibieron en esos momentos». Tal vez este elemento inconsciente haga referencia a uno de los aspectos más chocantes de la novela: que Isabel debe hacerse cargo (¿como una novelista?) del duradero amor por ella que siente Warburton, aun cuando él mismo crea estar enamorado de su hijastra. Tiene que juntar las piezas, interpretar la situación, y nosotros tenemos que aceptar su conclusión; por tanto «No se trataba tan solo de las palabras que acababa de decir, sino también de otras, llenas de continuas alusiones».

James quiere que sus lectores comprendan la trascendencia de esas supuestas «minucias». La vida de Isabel cambia cuando Osmond revela su primera decepción con ella: «Recordaba muy bien la primera muestra que él había dado de ese odio, que había sido como el timbre que anunciaba que se iba a levantar el telón del verdadero drama de sus

vidas». Una afirmación similar acompaña a ese temblor revelador en la voz de madame Merle en la climática escena del convento: «No pasó mucho tiempo sin que Isabel percibiera cómo se le quebraba levemente la voz, […] lo cual parecía representar en sí mismo un auténtico drama». (Recuerda al temblor de Charlotte en el libro V, capítulo 9 de *La copa dorada,* que a Maggie le suena «como el chillido de un alma en pena».) Estas notas desafinadas son, para las personas perceptivas, revelaciones de los significados ocultos. De ahí que cuando, en el capítulo 49, nos encontremos a madame Merle de pie y a Gilbert Osmond sentado, señal de una relación de prolongada intimidad, James nos recuerde que los hemos visto así antes, o que Isabel lo ha hecho, «en la ocasión mencionada en esta historia con el énfasis que le corresponde, no tanto por su importancia aparente como por la real». El «énfasis» aquí señala la originalidad de la invención de James; de la novela jamesiana, de hecho.

Parte de lo que mantiene vivo en nuestro recuerdo *Retrato de una dama* mucho después de haber cerrado el libro es su desenlace, en el que, como dice Isabel cerca del cierre, «no creo que haya terminado nada». Un crítico de la época, de hecho, se quejaba de que «este supuesto "retrato de una dama" queda inacabado justo en el punto en el que algunas pinceladas verdaderamente decisivas y esclarecedoras comienzan a ser posibles».[26] Nos deja en un grado peculiar, quizá, lo que el moribundo Ralph llama «una sensación de vida… de que seguimos aquí». Algunos años después, en «El arte de la ficción», James admite la presión entre muchos lectores de un «final feliz» en forma de «un reparto al fin de los premios, las pensiones, los maridos, las esposas, los bebés, los millones, los párrafos anexos y los comentarios alegres».[27] Ya en su diario se preparaba para la reacción inevitable ante su rechazo a dar tal gusto a los lectores:

> La crítica obvia, por descontado, será la de que no está terminado, que no he llevado a la heroína hasta el fin de su situación, que la he dejado *en l'air*. Esto es cierto y falso. Nunca se cuenta *todo* de nada, solo podemos coger lo que va junto. Lo que yo he hecho tiene esa unidad: va junto. Es completo en sí mismo, y el resto puede cogerse o no, más adelante.[28]

Esta concepción orgánica de James de «lo que va junto» quizá provenga de la pintura y de sus leyes de la composición: una enorme parte del poder hechizante del arte clásico es inherente a la idea del marco y a la ambigüedad de lo que hay más allá de él. En cualquier caso, la ambigüedad del final tal como es —lo cojamos como lo cojamos, no demasiado «feliz»— ha dado pie a una multiplicidad de interpretaciones de la novela.

En lo que respecta al argumento, cuando Isabel regresa a Roma, ¿piensa volver con Osmond? El moribundo Ralph se lo pregunta con desaliento, pero solo obtiene de ella esta respuesta: «No lo sé… no sabría decirte». Y si vuelve con él, ¿es para hacerle frente, desafiante, o piensa someterse —para consternación del lector— a su voluntad patriarcal? ¿O vuelve por la promesa que le ha hecho a Pansy?: «[…] volveré». Para Isabel «se había convertido en un mandamiento […] no desatender a Pansy bajo ningún concepto», como si James nos estuviese preparando para esta solícita protección final de nuestra huérfana heroína. Puede que Isabel tenga intención de ayudar a Pansy a desafiar a su padre, tal vez de ayudarla incluso a casarse con su querido Ned Rosier. Sin embargo, también hay quien sostiene que, dado que su partida se produce inmediatamente después de la escena de la apremiante pasión de Caspar Goodwood en Gardencourt, en la que Isabel siente que «nunca antes la habían amado de veras», y se ve físicamente sacudida por la necesidad que Goodwood tiene de ella —«El beso fue como un relámpago cegador»—, el regreso a Roma es un signo de su represión, su miedo y su huida de la sexualidad.[29] Que hacia el final de la novela James se abstenga de dar una explicación completa acerca de los sentimientos de Isabel significa que, aunque se nos diga mientras escapa de Goodwood que «Había una senda muy recta ante ella», no sabemos muy bien por qué o hacia dónde conduce (¿llevan todas las sendas rectas a Roma?). Puede que haya en el aire algún tipo de separación de Osmond, un divorcio a la práctica; como la de la señora y el señor Touchett: antes hemos sabido que «El señor Touchett solía pensar que Isabel le recordaba a su mujer cuando esta se encontraba en plena adolescencia».

Por otra parte, que Isabel escoja a Osmond puede verse como una muestra de su predilección temperamental por el heroísmo, incluso de una tendencia masoquista, que se anuncia cerca del comienzo de la novela: «A veces llegaba hasta el extremo de desear encontrarse algún día en una situación difícil, para así tener el placer de mostrarse todo lo heroica que la situación requiriese». Como hemos visto, Ralph más adelante comprende que Isabel, en su infelicidad, había «vislumbrado, en su opinión, cuál era la línea heroica que debía seguir y [estaba] deseosa de avanzar en esa dirección». Este decidido heroísmo, como el «trato heroico» de Minny Temple hacia sí misma, puede resultar engañoso, un signo de autodramatización romántica: ¿va a intentar que su matrimonio funcione? Puede que lo que la

impulse sea más que una ilusión, puede que sea una compulsión interior, en la que algunos críticos han visto un origen psicopatológico.[30] Isabel tiene miedo de sus sentimientos más profundos, como cuando Osmond le declara su amor: «Lo que acrecentaba aún más su temor era precisamente aquella fuerza que, en apariencia, debía haber hecho desvanecer todo temor: la conciencia de lo que había en su corazón. Era terrible tener que rendirse a eso». Pero podemos interpretarlo también como recelo —bastante justificado en este caso— respecto adónde la llevará un amor auténtico hacia Osmond; sabe que «El matrimonio siempre es un gran riesgo», como le dice más adelante a Ralph. De igual modo, el heroico camino final de Isabel, su senda recta, quizá consista en reunir de manera admirable el coraje que necesita para la ruptura, ya sea un divorcio o una separación, que se anticipaba en el capítulo 45: «[…] le parecía que cada vez estaba más cerca el día en que tendría que retractarse de eso que tan solemnemente había concedido».

El carácter irresoluble y el perdurable interés de estas cuestiones están entre las muchas cualidades que mantienen vivo el libro tras repetidas lecturas. Como lo está la profunda emoción de la trágica despedida de Isabel y Ralph, moribundo, donde el impulso hacia la verdad y su amor por él como un «hermano» triunfan al fin sobre todo lo demás con una franqueza infinitamente conmovedora que ha costado mucho alcanzar: «[…] nada importaba en esos momentos salvo el conocimiento de lo único que no era pura angustia: saber que se estaban enfrentando juntos a la verdad». Es incluso, de manera trascendente, una especie de final feliz; pues, como le dice Isabel a Ralph: «Aquí, de rodillas, contigo muriendo en mis brazos, soy más feliz de lo que lo he sido en mucho tiempo».

Las casi últimas palabras de Ralph a Isabel son: «No creo que un error tan generoso como el que cometiste pueda perjudicarte ya mucho más». James, cuyo interés por los errores generosos se prolongó al menos hasta su análisis del cometido por Lambert Strether, «su tributo al ideal», en *Los embajadores,* nos deja con la duda de si eso es cierto, y esperando que así sea. Cuando su joven amigo Arthur Benson le preguntó al respecto en 1898, James le respondió que «No escribiré jamás una secuela de *R. de una D.*».[31] Sabía que el efecto que tiene la novela sobre nosotros depende de ese final abierto que lleva la «senda recta» de Isabel a un futuro tan incierto como el nuestro.

PHILIP HORNE

Cronología

1843 Henry James nace el 15 de abril en la ciudad de Nueva York, en el número 21 de Washington Place. Fue el segundo de los cinco hijos de Henry James (1811-1882), teólogo especulativo y pensador social, cuyo padre, un estricto emprendedor, había amasado una fortuna estimada en tres millones de dólares, una de las más importantes de Estados Unidos en aquella época; y de su esposa, Mary (1810-1882), hija de James Walsh, un comerciante neoyorquino de algodón de origen escocés.

1843-1845 Acompaña a sus padres a París y a Londres.

1845-1847 La familia de James regresa a Estados Unidos y se instala en Albany, Nueva York.

1847-1855 La familia se instala en la ciudad de Nueva York. James se educa con tutores y en escuelas privadas.

1855-1858 La familia viaja por Europa: Ginebra, Londres, París, Boulogne-sur-Mer. A la vuelta a Estados Unidos se instala en Newport, Rhode Island.

1859-1860 La familia vuelve a Europa: James asiste a la escuela científica y luego a la Academia (más tarde Universidad) de Ginebra. Aprende alemán en Bonn.

En septiembre de 1860 la familia regresa a Newport. James entabla amistad con el futuro crítico T. S. Perry (que recuerda que James «no dejaba de escribir relatos, sobre todo relatos románticos») y el artista John La Farge.

1861-1863 Se lesiona la espalda mientras ayuda a extinguir un incendio en Newport y queda exento de prestar servicio en la guerra de Secesión (1861-1865).

En el otoño de 1862 ingresa en la facultad de Derecho de Harvard, donde estudiará durante un cuatrimestre. Comienza a enviar sus relatos a revistas.

1864 Su primer relato, «A Tragedy of Error», se publica en febrero de manera anónima en la revista *Continental Monthly*.

En mayo la familia se traslada al número 13 de Ashburton Place, Boston, Massachusetts.

En octubre James publica una reseña sin firmar en la *North American Review*.

1865 Su primer relato firmado, «Historia de un año», aparece en marzo en la revista *Atlantic Monthly*. Publica una crítica en el primer número de *The Nation* (Nueva York).

1866-1868 Continúa escribiendo reseñas y relatos.

En el verano de 1866 W. D. Howells, novelista, crítico y editor influyente, se convierte en su amigo.

En noviembre de 1866 la familia se traslada al número 20 de Quincy Street, junto a Harvard Yard, en Cambridge, Massachusetts.

1869 Por motivos de salud viaja a Europa, donde conoce a John Ruskin, William Morris, Charles Darwin y George Eliot; también visita Italia y Suiza.

1870 Su queridísima prima Minny Temple muere en Estados Unidos en marzo.

En mayo James vuelve a Cambridge de mala gana, todavía afectado.

1871 Su primera novela corta, *Guarda y tutela,* aparece por entregas entre agosto y diciembre en la revista *Atlantic Monthly*.

1872-1874 Acompaña a su hermana inválida, Alice, y a su tía Catherine Walsh («tía Kate») a Europa en mayo de 1872. Escribe crónicas de viaje para *The Nation.* Entre octubre de 1872 y septiembre de 1874 pasa temporadas en París, Roma, Suiza, Homburg e Italia sin su familia.

En la primavera de 1874 comienza en Florencia su primera novela larga, *Roderick Hudson.*

En septiembre regresa a Estados Unidos.

1875 Publica en enero *Un peregrino apasionado y otros cuentos,* la primera de sus obras que apareció en forma de libro. Le siguieron *Transatlantic Sketches* (apuntes de viaje) y *Roderick Hudson*, en noviembre. Pasa seis meses en Nueva York, en el número 111 de la calle Veinticinco Este, y luego tres meses en Cambridge.

El 11 de noviembre llega a París, al número 29 de la rue de Luxembourg, como corresponsal para el *New York Tribune.*

En diciembre comienza una nueva novela, *El americano.*

1876 Conoce a Gustave Flaubert, Iván Turguénev, Edmond de Goncourt, Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant y Émile Zola.

En diciembre se muda a Londres y se instala en el número 3 de Bolton Street, cerca de Piccadilly.

1877 Visita París, Florencia y Roma.

El americano se publica en mayo.

1878 Conoce a William Gladstone, Alfred Tennyson y Robert Browning.

En febrero se publica el primer libro de James en Londres, la colección de ensayos *French Poets and Novelists.*

La novela corta *Daisy Miller* aparece por entregas en *The Cornhill Magazine* durante el mes de julio, y *Harper's* la publica en noviembre en Estados Unidos, afianzando así el renombre de James a ambos lados del Atlántico.

En septiembre publica *Los europeos* (novela).

1879 En diciembre publica *Confianza* (novela) y *Hawthorne* (estudio crítico).

1880 En diciembre publica *Washington Square* (novela).

1881 Regresa a Estados Unidos en octubre; visita Cambridge.

En noviembre publica *Retrato de una dama* (novela).

1882 Su madre muere en enero. Visita Nueva York y Washington D. C.

En mayo viaja a Inglaterra, pero en diciembre regresa a Estados Unidos a causa de la muerte de su padre.

1883 En verano vuelve a Londres.

En noviembre Macmillan publica su obra narrativa completa en catorce volúmenes.

En diciembre publica *Portraits of Places* (crónicas de viaje).

1884 Su hermana Alice se traslada a Londres y se instala cerca de James.

En septiembre publica *A Little Tour in France* (crónicas de viaje) y *Tales of Three Cities;* «El arte de la ficción», su importante proclama artística, aparece en *Longman's Magazine.*

Entabla amistad con R. L. Stevenson y Edmund Gosse. En una carta a su amiga estadounidense Grace Norton escribe: «Nunca me casaré […] Ya soy lo bastante feliz y lo bastante desgraciado tal como están las cosas».

1885-1886 Publica dos novelas por entregas: *Las bostonianas* y *La princesa Casamassima.*

El 6 de marzo de 1886 se muda a un piso en De Vere Gardens 34.

1887 Visita Florencia y Venecia durante la primavera y el verano. Prosigue su amistad (iniciada en 1880) con la novelista estadounidense Constance Fenimore Woolson.

1888 Publica *El eco* (novela), *Los papeles de Aspern* (novela corta) y *Partial Portraits* (crítica).

1889 Publica la colección de relatos *Una vida en Londres*.

1890 Publica *La musa trágica* (novela).

1891 La adaptación teatral de *El americano* se representa durante una corta temporada en Londres y provincias.

1892 En febrero publica *La lección del maestro* (colección de relatos).

En marzo muere en Londres Alice James.

1893 Publica tres volúmenes de relatos: *The Real Thing* (marzo), *La vida privada* (junio) y *The Wheel of Time* (septiembre).

1894 Mueren Constance Fenimore Woolson y R. L. Stevenson.

1895 La obra *Guy Domville* se estrena el 5 de enero en el Saint James Theatre y es recibida con abucheos y aplausos; James abandona durante años la dramaturgia.

Visita Irlanda. Se aficiona al ciclismo. Publica dos volúmenes de relatos: *Terminations* (mayo) y *Embarrassments* (junio).

1896 Publica *La otra casa* (novela).

1897 Publica dos novelas: *El expolio de Poynton* y *Lo que Maisie sabía*.

En febrero empieza a dictar sus obras, debido a problemas de muñeca.

En septiembre alquila Lamb House, en Rye, Sussex.
1898 Se muda a Lamb House en junio. Entre sus vecinos de Sussex están los escritores Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells y Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford).
En agosto publica *En la jaula* (novela corta).
Otra vuelta de tuerca, una historia de fantasmas incluida en *The Two Magics,* se convierte en octubre en su obra más popular desde *Daisy Miller*.
1899 En abril publica la novela *La edad ingrata*.
En agosto compra Lamb House en propiedad.
1900 Se afeita la barba.
En agosto publica una colección de relatos, *The Soft Side.*
Entabla amistad con la novelista estadounidense Edith Wharton.
1901 En febrero publica la novela *La fontana sagrada.*
1902 En agosto publica la novela *Las alas de la paloma.*
1903 En febrero publica la colección de relatos *Lo más selecto.*
En septiembre publica la novela *Los embajadores.*
En octubre publica la biografía *William Wetmore Story and his Friends.*
1904 En agosto viaja en barco a Estados Unidos, su primera visita en veintiún años. Pasa por Nueva Inglaterra, Nueva York, Filadelfia, Washington, el Sur, San Luis, Chicago, Los Ángeles y San Francisco.
En noviembre publica la novela *La copa dorada.*
1905 El presidente Theodore Roosevelt lo invita en enero a la Casa Blanca. Lo eligen miembro de la Academia Americana de las Artes y las Letras.
De vuelta en Lamb House en julio, comienza a revisar sus obras para la New York Edition, la edición estadounidense de sus obras completas: *The Novels and Tales of Henry James.*
En octubre publica *English Hours* (ensayos de viaje).
1906-1908 Selecciona, ordena, prologa y encarga ilustraciones para la New York Edition, publicada entre 1907 y 1909 en veinticuatro volúmenes.
1907 En enero publica *The American Scene* (ensayos de viaje).
1908 En marzo, producción de la obra *The High Bid* en Edimburgo.
1909 En octubre publica *Italian Hours* (ensayos de viaje). Problemas de salud.
1910 En agosto viaja a Estados Unidos con su hermano William, quien muere una semana después de su regreso.
En octubre publica *The Finer Grain* (relatos).
1911 Vuelve a Inglaterra en agosto.
En octubre publica *La protesta* (novela adaptada a partir de la obra de teatro).
Comienza a trabajar en una autobiografía.
1912 En junio es investido doctor honoris causa por la Universidad de Oxford.
En octubre alquila un piso en el número 21 de Carlyle Mansions, en Cheyne Walk, Chelsea; padece de culebrilla (herpes zóster).
1913 En marzo publica *Un chiquillo y otros* (primer volumen de su autobiografía).
John Singer Sargent le pinta un retrato con motivo de su setenta cumpleaños (15 de abril).
1914 En marzo publica *Notes of a Son and Brother* (segundo volumen de su autobiografía).
Estalla en agosto la Primera Guerra Mundial; James se compromete fervientemente con la causa británica y ayuda a refugiados belgas y soldados heridos.
En octubre publica *Notes on Novelists.*
1915 Es nombrado presidente de honor del Cuerpo de Ambulancias de los Voluntarios Americanos.
En julio se convierte en ciudadano británico.
Escribe una serie de ensayos sobre la guerra (recogidos en *Within the Rim,* 1919) y el prólogo de *Letters from America* (1916), del poeta Rupert Brooke, fallecido el año antes.
El 2 de diciembre sufre un derrame cerebral.

1916 Recibe la Orden del Mérito en la ceremonia de las Condecoraciones de Año Nuevo.

Muere el 28 de febrero. Tras su funeral en la Vieja Iglesia de Chelsea, su cuñada, clandestinamente, se lleva las cenizas de vuelta a Estados Unidos, donde son enterradas en la parcela familiar, en Cambridge.

* Entre 1907 y 1909 Henry James publicó con Scribner's (Nueva York) una nueva edición de sus obras en veinticuatro volúmenes, ordenadas temáticamente, con prefacios escritos para la ocasión y una revisión a veces profusa del texto, sobre todo en el caso de las obras de juventud. Asimismo, James excluyó deliberadamente algunas novelas, como *Los europeos*, *Washington Square* o *Los embajadores*. Todo ello dio y sigue dando lugar a cierta controversia entre la crítica. Reproducimos en esta edición el prefacio de 1908 y seguimos el texto de la novela según lo revisó el autor (volúmenes III y IV). *[N. de los E.]*

1. *Henry James. Letters*, Leon Edel, ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts y Londres, Belknap Press, 1974-1984, vol. II, p. 179.
2. *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 208.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 218 (26 de marzo de 1870), 224 y 227 (ambas del 29 de marzo de 1870).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 222 (26 de marzo de 1870).
5. *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 324.
6. *Literary Criticism. Essays on Literature, American Writers and English Writers*, Leon Edel y Mark Wilson, eds., Nueva York, Library of America, 1984, vol. I, p. 420.
7. *Henry James. Letters*, vol. I, p. 221 (26 de marzo de 1870).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 223 (29 de marzo de 1870).
9. *Autobiography*, Frederick W. Dupee, ed., Nueva York, Criterion Books, 1956, p. 522.
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11. Henry James, *Transatlantic Sketches*, Boston, J. R. Osgood, 1875, pp. 123-124. Hay una traducción española de *Vacaciones en Roma* editada por Miguel Ángel Martínez Cabeza, Madrid, Adaba Editores, 2012.
12. Joseph L. Tribble, «Cherbuliez's *Le Roman d'une honnête femme*. Another Source of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*», noviembre de 1968, vol. 40, n.º 3, pp. 279-293.
13. Véase Kathleen Lawrence, «Osmond's Complaint. Gilbert Osmond's Mother and the Cultural Context of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*», diciembre de 2005, vol. 26, n.º 1, pp. 52-67.
14. Andrea Roberts Beauchamp, «Isabel Archer. A Possible Source for *The Portrait of a Lady*», mayo de 1977, vol. 29, n.º 2, pp. 267-271.
15. Philip Horne, ed., *Henry James. A Life in Letters*, Londres, Penguin, 1999, p. 74.
16. Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance*, Nueva York, Scribner's, 1964, p. 249.
17. Robert Browning, «My Last Duchess. Ferrara», líneas 45-46 y 1-2, en Daniel Karlin, ed., *Browning. Selected Poetry*, Londres, Penguin, 1989, pp. 25-26. Véase también Eleanor Cook, «The Italian Journey. From James to Eliot to Browning», en Bruno Magliochetti y Anthony Verna, eds., *The Motif of the Journey in Nineteenth Century Italian Literature*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1994, pp. 41-52.
18. «The Art of Fiction», en *Literary Criticism*, vol. I, p. 58. Hay una traducción española: Henry James, *El arte de la ficción*, León, Publicaciones Universidad de León, 1992.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 54 y 58.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
23. En la traducción de la obra coordinada por Manuel Ángel Conejero para Cátedra. *(N. de la T.)*
24. Ezra Pound, «Henry James», en J. Donn Vann, ed., *Critics on Henry James*, Londres, Allen & Unwin, 1974, pp. 38-40; véase también pp. 38-39.
25. T. S. Eliot, «In Memory», *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32; véase también p. 31.
26. Anon, *Athenaeum*, n.º 2.822 (26 de noviembre de 1881), en Kevin J. Hayes, ed., *Henry James. The Contemporary Reviews*, Cambridge y Nueva York, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 121-122.
27. «The Art of Fiction», *Literary Criticism*, vol. I, p. 48.
28. «Henry James on *The Portrait of a Lady* in his Notebooks», en Philip Horne, ed., *The Portrait of a Lady*, Londres, Penguin, 2011, p. 627.
29. Véase, por ejemplo, el debate planteado por Richard Poirier en *The Comic Sense of Henry James*, Londres, Chatto & Windus, 1960.
30. Véase, por ejemplo, Alfred Habegger, *Henry James and the «Woman Business»*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.
31. Horne, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

Henry James (Nueva York, 1843-Londres, 1916) nació en el seno de una adinerada y culta familia de origen irlandés. Recibió una educación ecléctica y cosmopolita, que se desarrolló mayoritariamente en Europa. En 1875 se estableció en Inglaterra después de publicar en Estados Unidos sus primeros relatos. El conflicto entre la cultura europea y la estadounidense está en el centro de muchas de sus obras, desde su primera novela, *Roderick Hudson* (1875), hasta la trilogía con la cual culmina su carrera: *Las alas de la paloma* (1902), *Los embajadores* (1903) y *La copa dorada* (1904). Maestro de la novela breve, algunos de sus logros más celebrados se hallan en este género: *Otra vuelta de tuerca* (1898), *En la jaula* (1898) o *Los periódicos* (1903). Cerca del final de su vida se nacionalizó inglés. En palabras de Gore Vidal, «no había nada que James hiciera como un inglés, ni tampoco como un estadounidense. Él mismo era su gran realidad, un nuevo mundo, una *terra incognita* cuyo mapa tardaría el resto de sus días en trazar para todos nosotros».

Philip Horne es catedrático del University College de Londres. Ha sido presidente de la International Henry James Society y suya es una de las obras fundamentales sobre el autor y su proceso de reescritura, *Henry James and Revision. The New York Edition* (1990), así como la biografía epistolar *Henry James. A Life in Letters* (1999). Ha estado al cuidado de varias ediciones de sus novelas y asimismo dirige la biblioteca Henry James en Penguin Classics.

Ana Eiroa es traductora y ha trabajado como docente en la Universidad de Alicante. Suyas son las traducciones al español de *Retrato de una dama* de Henry James y *La renuncia* de Edith Wharton.

Título original: *The Portrait of a Lady*

Edición en formato digital: septiembre de 2015

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ISBN: 978-84-9105-161-9

Composición digital: M.I. maqueta, S.C.P.

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